時雨沢恵一
KEIICHI SIGSAWA
イラスト●黒星紅白
ILLUSTRATION :
KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI
アリソンIII〔下〕
陰謀という名の列車
電撃文庫

アリソンⅢ《下》

陰謀という名の列車

時雨沢恵一
KEIICHI SIGSAWA
イラスト●黒星紅白
ILLUSTRATION：KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI

Allison III(Part 2): A Train Named Conspiracy

Written by Sigsawa Keiichi
Illustration by Kouhaku Kuroboshi

CONTENTS

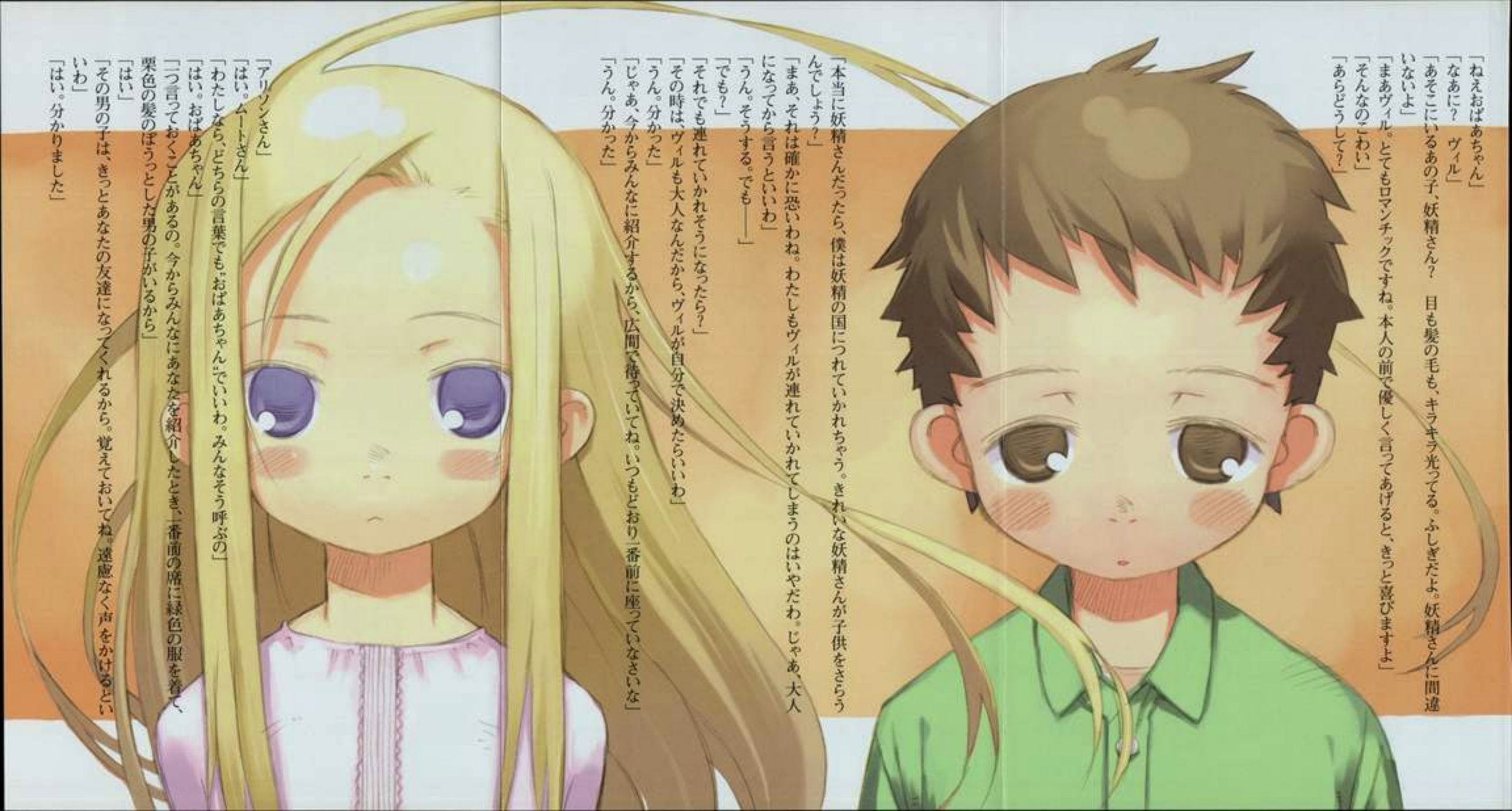
第六章「放火と爆破」——— 9

第七章「対岸」——— 51

第八章「陰謀という名の列車」——— 80

第九章「答えはアリソン」——— 130

序章の前・b——— 195



「ねえおばあちゃん」
「なあに？　ヴィル」
「あそこにいるあの子、妖精さん？　目も髪の毛も、キラキラ光ってる。ふしぎだよ。妖精さんに間違いないよ」
「まあヴィル。とてもロマンチックですね。本人の前で優しく言ってあげると、きっと喜びますよ」
「そんなのこわい」
「あらどうして？」
「本当に妖精さんだったら、僕は妖精の国につれていかれちゃう。きれいな妖精さんが子供をさらうんでしょう？」
「まあ、それは確かに恐いわね。わたしもヴィルが連れていかれてしまうのはいやだわ。じゃあ、大人になってから言うといいわ」
「うん。そうする。でも――」
「でも？」
「それでも連れていかれそうになったら？」
「その時は、ヴィルも大人なんだから、ヴィルが自分で決めたらいいわ」
「うん。分かった」
「じゃあ、今からみんなに紹介するから、広間で待っていてね。いつもどおり一番前に座っていなさいな」
「うん。分かった」
「アリソンさん」
「はい。ムートさん」
「わたしなら、どちらの言葉でも〝おばあちゃん〟でいいわ。みんなそう呼ぶの」
「はい。おばあちゃん」
「一つ言っておくことがあるの。今からみんなにあなたを紹介したとき、一番前の席に緑色の服を着て、栗色の髪のぼうっとした男の子がいるから」
「はい」
「その男の子は、きっとあなたの友達になってくれるから。覚えておいてね。遠慮なく声をかけるといいわ」
「はい。分かりました」

“Grandma, Grandma.”

“What is it, Wil?”

“That girl’s a fairy, isn’t she? Her eyes and hair are so shiny. She must be a fairy.”

“Oh my. How romantic of you, Wil. You should tell her yourself. I’m sure she’ll be very happy to hear that.”

“No. I’m scared.”

“Oh? Why might that be?”

“If she really is a fairy, she’ll take me away to Fairy Land. Don’t pretty fairies steal kids away?”

“Dear me, that does sound very scary, Wil. I don’t want to have you stolen away. Then why don’t you tell her once you’ve grown up?”

“Well… okay. But—”

“But?”

“What if she still wants to steal me away then?”

“Since you’ll be an adult, you’ll be able to decide for yourself, Wil.”

“Okay.”

“Now, I’m going to introduce her to everyone, so go wait in the auditorium. Sit at the very front, like you always do.”

“Okay, Grandma.”

“Allison.”

“Yes, Madam Mut?”

“Please, call me ‘Grandma’. That’s what everyone calls me here.”

“Yes, Grandma.”

“I need to tell you something very important. When I introduce you to everyone today, there’s going to be a brown-haired boy in a green shirt sitting in the front row.”

“Mhm.”

“Remember, that boy will definitely be your friend. You should go and talk to him—there’s no need to be shy.”

“Yes, Grandma.”

アリソン・ウィッティングトン

十七歳。ロクシアーヌク連邦（東側）空軍伍長、飛行機移送部隊所属の飛行士。金髪碧眼。健康かつ身体能力抜群だが寝起き悪し。行動は一見無茶無謀。八歳で父親を戦争で亡くし、孤児院に引き取られてヴィルと出会った。

ヴィルヘルム・シュルツ

十七歳。東側のラブトア共和国、ロウ・スネイアム記念上級学校六年生。のんびり屋で成績は優秀。三歳の時、親によって孤児院に捨てられた。その五年後以来、アリソンの幼なじみにして子分――もとい、信頼できる部下、もしくは。

カー・ベネディクト

二十五歳。ベゼル・イルトア王国連合（西側）空軍最年少の少佐。腕のいい戦闘機乗り。"歴史的発見の英雄"であり世界一の有名人。女性に大人気だが、本人は非常に不満。ちなみにカーが名字。

フィオナ（フランチェスカ）

二十歳。東側連邦の一国、イクス王国の王家の生き残りにして次期女王の予定。ヴィルとアリソン、そしてベネディクトの活躍で国民の前に姿を現す。

Allison Whittington: 17 years old. A staff sergeant in the Roxcheanuk Confederation Air Force. She is part of an aircraft transportation unit. Allison has blond hair and blue eyes, and is extremely athletic. However, she is not a morning person. Allison often acts without thinking. She lost her father in battle when she was eight years old, at which point she was brought to the orphanage where she met Wil.

Wilhelm Schultz: 17 years old. A sixth-year student at Lowe Sneum Memorial Secondary School in the Republic of Raputoa on the east side of the river. Wil is a laid-back student with an excellent academic record, who was abandoned at an orphanage at the age of three. Since the age of eight, he has been Allison's friend, underling, trustworthy subordinate, and maybe even her—

Carr Benedict: 24 years old. The youngest major in the history of the Allied Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa. He is known as a hero who made a historic discovery. Benedict is extremely popular with women, but he is less than pleased with his newfound stardom. 'Carr' is his family name.

Fiona(**Francesca**): 20 years old. A princess of the Kingdom of Iks, which is a part of the Roxcheanuk Confederation on the east side of the river. She is the only surviving member of the Royal Family of Iks, and is set to become the queen. She revealed her survival to the people of her country with the help of Wil, Allison, and Benedict.

Chapter 6: Fire and Explosions

"I bet Wil and Mom and Dad are enjoying their trips right about now. So why do I have to be stuck here, fishing with my stupid brother?" Eumie grumbled.

Wil's friend and Euphemia were sitting on a bridge. They were both wearing brown corduroy pants and hunting jackets.

The sky was a clear blue. Underneath the classic Raputoa weather lay a large lake. Brother and sister sat side-by-side at the edge of a long bridge, fishing poles lowered into the water. The soles of their shoes were reflected on the calm surface. The lures did not so much as twitch.

"There's days like this in life, y'know." Her brother said, relaxed. There was nothing but water in their bucket. Next to it was a small bottle of water and a paper bag filled with raisins.

Eumie pulled up her rod; the bait was still there. She lowered it again.

"I hope he comes back soon."

Her brother glanced at her.

"Come to think of it, I haven't told you yet, have I?"

Some time passed. As her brother explained the situation, Eumie took to her feet in shock.

"He's with a girl he grew up at the orphanage with?! You're supposed to tell me these things before he leaves!" She fumed.

"If I said anything, you might've ended up beating him half to death so he wouldn't go."

"What's she like?!"

"Well, let's see…"

He gave his sister his opinion. Eumie was, for a moment, at a loss for words.

"No way…"

"At least, that's what I think. Although Wil didn't say that himself. But think about it. This is Wil—the honor student who never misses a class and even cleans out his room every day. He wrote two essays reflecting on his actions in one year. And both times, it had to do with her. In other words, Wil either *can't* or *won't* go against her."

Eumie was silent.

"If she asks him to move in with her, he probably would."

"I had no idea… How could there be someone like that?" Eumie whispered, her fists trembling. Her brother, sitting next to her, remained as relaxed as ever as he checked his bait.

“Well, that’s the gist of it. Thought you should know.”

He cast the line again. The tip of the lure shook as it dipped into the water, then went still.

“Big brother…”

“Hm?”

“So does that mean… I’m in unrequited love?”

He did not answer. He turned and looked up at Eumie, who was on the verge of tears.

“Well, I guess that’s the most appropriate answer.”

He did not lie or sugarcoat things to avoid upsetting his sister. Eumie closed her eyes at his honest answer and slowly hung her head.

“I see…” She whispered. Her brother turned his gaze back to his lure. Then he added,

“Don’t get too down. I’ll do whatever I can ‘til you get back on your feet. In other words, I won’t do anything that I can’t.”

She gave a short word of thanks. He felt her hand on his shoulder. And her forehead on his back.

“Oh… Wil…”

He could her her murmuring.

“Stupid Wil!”

With a cry, Eumie kicked her brother in the back.

With a loud splash, he fell headfirst into the lake. Waves formed on the water and the lures shook violently.

He raised his head out of the water and spat water from his mouth, complaining,

“I have faith in you, Wil. If you fail again, that’s strike three. Not gonna help you anymore after this one.”

* * *

The transcontinental express train, reduced to eight cars, continued through the mountain range.

Stone mountains had been chiseled to create room for the tracks, which led in a sharp incline. The diesel locomotive at the very front spewed black smoke. To the left of the rails was the stony mountain, and to the right was a gentle downward slope.

Wil and the others were in the now-second-to-last car—car 7, the second dining car. To be specific, they were sitting on the dining chairs lined up against the left wall near the middle

of the car. From the front, it was Benedict, then Fiona, then Allison, then Wil. Wil had not returned Benedict's gun, and Benedict did not ask for it back.

It had been over an hour since they left the supply base. On the table were the remnants of their makeshift brunch, which they had brought from the galley. An empty breadbasket, bottles of butter and jam, a string for tying ham, and several empty bottles of water.

"Things will be all right as long as nothing happens. There are many troops and people in the village." Benedict said. "Of course, until then we must fill our meals with sandwiches. When we come to the village around dinnertime, I will serve you food from the local land. I heard that the village's area is famous for meat pies stuffed with tomatoes."

"That's great. But before that, I'm going to give the culprit a good kick in the pants. For destroying this awesome trip." Allison grumbled, staring out the window.

"So was the culprit really one of them? That means we're safe now, but… it's a little sad." Fiona said stiffly.

Wil was silent, his eyes on the window. But his gaze was fixed near the frames, unmoving. He was not looking at anything in particular—instead, he was thinking about something.

Many seconds of silence passed.

"What if—"

Wil suddenly spoke. Allison, Fiona, and Benedict turned at once. Wil met their eyes.

"What if that's not the case? What if the culprit isn't after Mr. Terreur?"

"What do you mean?" Allison asked, astonished. Wil shrugged lightly.

"It's just a hypothesis. I was trying to see if there were any other possibilities."

"And did you find one?" Asked Allison. Wil shook his head.

"No. So I'm still trying to figure something out."

"Man." Allison sighed. "If you think of something, let us know. We'll listen."

Yet again, silence fell over them. The train continued undeterred down the tracks. Great valleys and snow-capped peaks passed by the windows.

"I'm bored." Said Allison.

"Me too."

"I am too."

Fiona and Benedict replied at once. But the conversation did not continue.

It was after passing several tunnels, when Benedict mumbled that it was about time for them to reach the ridge of the mountain.

"It's me. May I come in?"

The dining car door opened quietly and Major Stork entered. Four sets of eyes turned to him.

“I sincerely apologize for getting you involved in this situation. I’m afraid I didn’t have much of a choice. It would be too difficult for me alone to act in case of an emergency, since the VIP trusts me so little.” He said, putting down his suitcase next to the table. Because he spoke in Bezelese, Fiona could not understand.

“He is sorry that we are pulled into an annoying work, but he asks us to help for now.” Benedict summarized.

“Don’t you have to be in Mr. Terreur’s cabin?” Asked Wil.

“It looks like I’d be better off out here than in there.” Major Stork shrugged. “I had a look around the train on the way, and I didn’t spot any problems in particular. I spoke with the engineers as well—they say that the locomotive is running smoothly.”

With that, he glanced at the wristwatch on his left arm. Then, he looked out the window and said exactly what Benedict had said.

“What a peaceful sight. Things will be all right as long as nothing happens.”

An observation craft was flying over the mountains.

It maintained altitude to avoid crashing into the mountaintops. A view straight out of a map slowly passed under the little craft. The mountains, covered in earth and rock, were mostly brown. The peaks and the northern slopes were shining white, still covered in snow. From the valleys and below were patches of green.

In the long, thin cockpit were three seats lined up in a row. The first lieutenant at the back, who was using a pair of binoculars to look downward out of the jutting window, spoke.

“There! I see it!”

He tapped the man in front of him on the back.

“First Lieutenant Klein, look. The lower right. Just underneath. It really was in the area. Just as expected.”

“Where? Ah, I see them. Confirmed.”

The other first lieutenant—Klein—replied, looking down with his own binoculars where the man in the back had indicated. Beyond the round lenses he could see a thin white line moving along the south side of a wide valley.

First Lieutenant Klein tapped the pilot on the shoulder. The pilot handed him a radio and a headset. Klein put on the headset, pressed the call button, and spoke.

“This is Klein. I’ve confirmed the train’s location. It will pass a tunnel in approximately ten kilometers. Are preparations complete? Will you make it in time?”

Several seconds later, the pilot gave him a reply. Klein turned to the other first lieutenant and gave him a thumbs-up. He praised the pilot via radio.

"Excellent work. The transcontinental has been reduced to eight cars. The last car is the lounge car. Our first priority is to secure the target. Do not let your guard down."

He stopped, but then added,

"Contact Squad 2 just in case. Have them step in with Plan B if we miss our chance. Ensure that the diversion is effective. Over."

Then, he handed the radio back to the pilot and ordered,

"Make landing at Squad 2's standby location. I'm stepping in as well."

The pilot nodded firmly.

The craft slowly veered to the right.

* * *

The tracks ran across stony slopes that had been carved flat.

They followed a winding path along the bald, rocky mountain, making one turn after another. At points along the way, there were short stretches where the tracks split off into two. When the slope was gentle and there was a large, flat area, the rails forked and ran parallel to one another for hundreds of meters. They were turn-outs that prevented trains from running into one another, allowing them to bypass other trains.

Some of the jutting turn-outs were in tunnels about 200 meters long. There was one tunnel entrance per set of tracks, and the interiors were also separate. It was impossible to see the other set of tracks while inside.

The transcontinental express arrived at a turn-out. The diesel locomotive whistled as it entered the main tunnel on the right.

Dozens of seconds later, the locomotive emerged from the other side. The eight cars followed safely after. The train loudly passed the turn-out, going down a gentle slope toward the foot of the mountains in the west.

About twenty seconds later.

A round light shone from inside the darkness of the tunnel on the right side from the main one—in other words, the entrance of the turn-out tunnel.

Soon, the rumbling of the engine steadily grew louder. There was a loud whistle.

A diesel locomotive with its headlights turned on slowly emerged. It was about half the size of the one that towed the transcontinental express, but was nearly identical in appearance. It was, typical of military gear, painted khaki. Over the place where the vehicle number should be was a wood veneer.

Equipped on either side of the wide doors at the head were machine guns. Large magazines were atop the guns, and the barrels were encased in large cylinders.

Soon after the locomotive emerged, the cars it towed showed themselves. One khaki-colored car for carrying soldiers, and two roofed freight cars. Over a dozen soldiers were on the first car. They all wore green woolen green combat gear and were armed with submachine guns. They were also in balaclavas. One of the uniformed men opened the door to the driver's cabin on the locomotive, passed the car, and stepped out of the door.

The four-section train emerged fully from its hiding place. The headlight was extinguished. The train continued for about a hundred meters, then came to a stop. The soldier who hopped off the locomotive adjusted the rails at the junction, connecting the main tracks. Then, he signaled the train and returned to the locomotive.

The train slowly shifted onto the tracks used by the transcontinental express. And little by little, it gained speed.

"Huh?"

Allison mumbled.

She was sitting on the windowsill on the left side of the dining car, watching Wil—who was in the chair in front of her—and the scenery, one after another. When the train met a gentle left curve in the tracks, she spotted the scenery behind the train. For a split second, she saw a small green dot on the rails. But it quickly disappeared behind the stone mountain next to the tracks.

"What's wrong?" Wil asked in Roxchean, raising his head. Allison replied in Roxchean.

"Nothing. I just thought I saw something."

"What? Where?"

"Behind the train. But it's not like anything's going to be on the same track, anyway. I was probably just seeing things." Allison concluded with a shrug. Wil frowned. Unbeknownst to him, Major Stork—sitting a slight distance away—was watching them.

"Allison, with your eyesight, I doubt you'd—"

The moment Wil spoke,

"What is the matter?"

Major Stork suddenly spoke up loudly. Of course, in Bezelese. Benedict, who was dozing off in his chair, looked up. Fiona, asleep as she leaned against him, twitched her eyes slightly but did not wake.

Allison shot Stork a glare and replied icily, in Bezelese.

"Nothing."

"How can you be so certain?!" Major Stork roared, sounding unusually angry.

Instead of Allison, who made a point of flaring up in response, Wil answered.

“She said that she thought she saw something behind us, but that she was probably seeing things.”

“!”

At that point, Major Stork’s expression changed as he rose quickly from his seat. The chair fell loudly to the floor. Fiona twitched as she opened her eyes.

“What is the matter?”

Ignoring Benedict’s question, Major Stork began running down the dining car. He passed Wil and Allison, opened the door, and disappeared into the lounge car.

Wil glanced at Allison and stood.

“Let’s go. Something’s wrong.”

“Man…”

When Allison and Wil left the dining car,

“What’s going on…?”

Fiona, who had finally awakened, asked Benedict.

“I do not know for sure yet… but I do not think we will arrive at the village without something happening.”

At the end of the lounge car, Major Stork was sitting in the hall in front of the doors as he examined the coupling.

“What’re you up to?”

“What are you doing?”

Allison and Wil opened the door into the hallway.

“Please don’t step any further toward the coupling.” Major Stork warned, holding out an arm to stop them.

Major Stork sat in front of the door on the right, and Allison and Wil across from him as they poked their heads out the coupling in the middle. Beyond the shaking coupling was not even a set of railings. The noise from the wheels and the wind buzzed in their ears. The tracks flowed past behind the train.

“You said you saw something?” Asked Major Stork. Allison replied loudly so as to not lose out to the noise.

“I thought saw a green dot. But I might’ve been seeing things.”

“You said you were a pilot. You must have very good eyesight, then.”

"I guess."

Benedict and Fiona came following, and asked Wil to explain the situation. Wil replied honestly that he wasn't sure yet.

"Shit… they're too early." Major Stork cursed under his breath, glancing at his wristwatch as he stared at the tracks behind them.

At that moment, the locomotive of the pursuing train turned the corner and came into view.

"Should've trusted my eyes." Allison said indifferently.

"There really *is* something—" Wil began, but Benedict cut him off.

"Yes. Confirmed. A train. I see a locomotive car."

Fiona and Wil also peeked out, switching with Benedict and Allison. They could see the train moving right up to them as it turned the corner.

"That is a military train. Maybe they heard the story and came to defend us." Benedict speculated, watching the train approach. Allison and the others took turns taking peeks at the locomotive.

"…"

Meanwhile, Major Stork had his head bowed with his hand against the left wall.

A soldier on the locomotive, now about a hundred meters away, came into view. The train disappeared behind a corner for a moment and emerged again—and at that very moment, the soldier set off a flare.

A green ball of light flew off diagonally, leaving a trail of white smoke.

"That looks like a signal flare. What does it mean?" Allison asked.

"Hm. I'm not sure." Benedict replied, completely honest.

"Do *you* know?" Allison asked, turning to the major across the hall. Four sets of eyes were fixed on him. Major Stork slowly raised his head.

"It's probably an order to stop." He replied quietly, reaching for the holster on his right side. He drew a polished black handgun—an automatic model issued by the military. It was already loaded and cocked. All he had to do was disarm the safety, and it could be fired.

"Wh-what—"

"It looks like we have no choice."

Cutting Benedict off, Major Stork raised his gun. He avoided the four people ahead of him as he pointed the barrel overhead, slowly walking to the coupling and taking aim at the locomotive.

“Everyone, back into the cars!” He cried, pulling the trigger.

The crisp ring of gunfire disappeared into the roar of the train. The shell casing hit the cover over the coupling and fell onto the tracks. Major Stork, holding on to a handrail with his left hand, pulled the trigger twice every second.

“What the heck’s going on here?!” Allison yelled, covering an ear with one hand and pulling Wil to his feet with the other, and taking a step back. Fiona screamed softly. Benedict pulled her into his arms.

Several of the bullets hit the head of the locomotive—which was a scant fifty meters away—and sent sparks flying. The soldiers on standby at the doors rushed to duck for cover. Had their engineer hit the brakes? The gap between the trains widened.

After four or five seconds of unexpected gunfire, the slide of the gun came down fully and stopped. Major Stork took shelter in the coupling, quickly pulling out the empty magazine and taking out a spare one from his holster. Then, he quickly loaded it into the gun and pulled the slide with his fingers. Now loaded, the slide returned to ready position.

“All of you, inside!”

With that, Major Stork ordered Benedict to open to door and go inside. Still holding Fiona, Benedict kicked the door open and ran into the room that was furnished with rows of sofas. Allison and Wil followed.

Major Stork leapt over the center area in one bound as he entered the car.

All five of them had just returned to the center of the lounge.

“What is going on here, Major?!” Benedict demanded. Major Stork swore bitterly.

“Shit. It looks like the intel was correct.”

“What intel?” Repeated Benedict. Major Stork replied, having regained some semblance of calm.

“It’s about the people who are out to assassinate Mr. Terreur. …They’re from our end. Although I do suppose it’s very vague information. There are countless people in Sou Be-Il who despise Mr. Terreur for his leading role in supplying the Roxchean military. And they have countless reasons to do so.”

“Why didn’t you tell us earlier—”

Major Stork cut off Benedict’s incensed question.

“The situation did not call for it. My superior only mentioned it briefly just before I left the capital.”

“But you could have stopped the tour!”

“Major Carr. If you are threatened, do you stop going out altogether?”

“If you’d at least mentioned it at the supply base—”

“How? Should I have said, ‘Someone from Sou Be-Il may attempt something foolish, so let us all stay together. Although there may be a murderer in our midst.’?”

Benedict did not respond.

“That’s enough!” Allison cried.

At that point, there was a splintering noise at the back of the car, like several tree trunks snapping at once.

“What was that?” She asked.

“It’s them. They must’ve manned their machine guns. Let’s all get a little further ahead.” Major Stork said, gesturing as though pushing everyone toward the dining car.

Benedict and Fiona passed by the piano. Hiding Fiona behind the bar, Benedict waited for the others.

“What will you do now, Major?”

“What’re you going to do?”

Benedict and Allison asked in unison. Major Stork holstered his gun.

“They’re planning to deploy men to take over this train.”

“As if I couldn’t tell!” Allison cried.

“If we’re attacked by armed men, our only option will be to surrender.” Benedict said, holding back his emotions. He pressed his face against the window to survey the situation behind them.

“They will launch another assault. What are you going to do?”

Major Stork did not answer. Instead, he turned and went over to the counter. He stood against it and leaned toward the shelf.

“I suppose not even my retirement savings will be enough to pay off the the damages.”

With a smile, he picked up a bottle of liquor and turned around. The bottle contained a drink that was extremely high in alcohol, often drunk in colder countries. Under the label was a warning in red letters: ‘Do not drink next to a lit candle’. Major Stork opened the bottle and began to pour out the contents all around the car. The smell of alcohol filled the lounge.

“I-is this all right?” Benedict stammered, realizing what he intended.

“Whatever it takes to survive!” Allison said, joining the major. She easily leapt over the counter and picked up two of the same bottles. She threw them toward Wil and Benedict, who began to pour out the liquor over the sofas and the windowsills. Meanwhile, Allison opened another bottle and stuffed a handkerchief that was lying on the counter into the mouth. When she turned the bottle upside-down, the liquor slowly began to soak the handkerchief.

“They’re getting closer again! There are soldiers at the front!” Fiona yelled, watching with her face against the window.

“Understood. Go.” Benedict said tersely in Bezelese, giving Wil a light push on the back. “You too, Major Stork.”

Benedict led Fiona away to the dining car.

“Understood.”

Upon pouring out a bottle over the grand piano, Major Stork threw aside the empty bottle and turned.

“Here.” Allison said, holding out a gift. It was the makeshift petrol bomb she had made earlier. Major Stork took it with a smile.

“A charming gift, Miss.”

“This is no time to be impressed. Just hurry up!”

No sooner had she spoken did Allison turn and disappear into the dining car, giving Wil—who had been waiting for her—a push on the back.

“Hah hah!”

Watching them depart, Major Stork burst into laughter as he stood alone in the lounge car. He reached toward the counter with his right hand and took out a single matchstick from a clearly expensive silver case. He struck it against the case and held it next to the handkerchief that stuck out of the bottle.

The silent flame began to burn the cloth. Major Stork held out the bottle and set the piano on fire. It quickly burst into flames. Ripples of blue flame cascaded along the surfaces slick with alcohol.

Without a word, he threw the bottle against the floor. There was a clatter as the carpet caught fire. The flames soon spread to the sofas and the curtains.

“…”

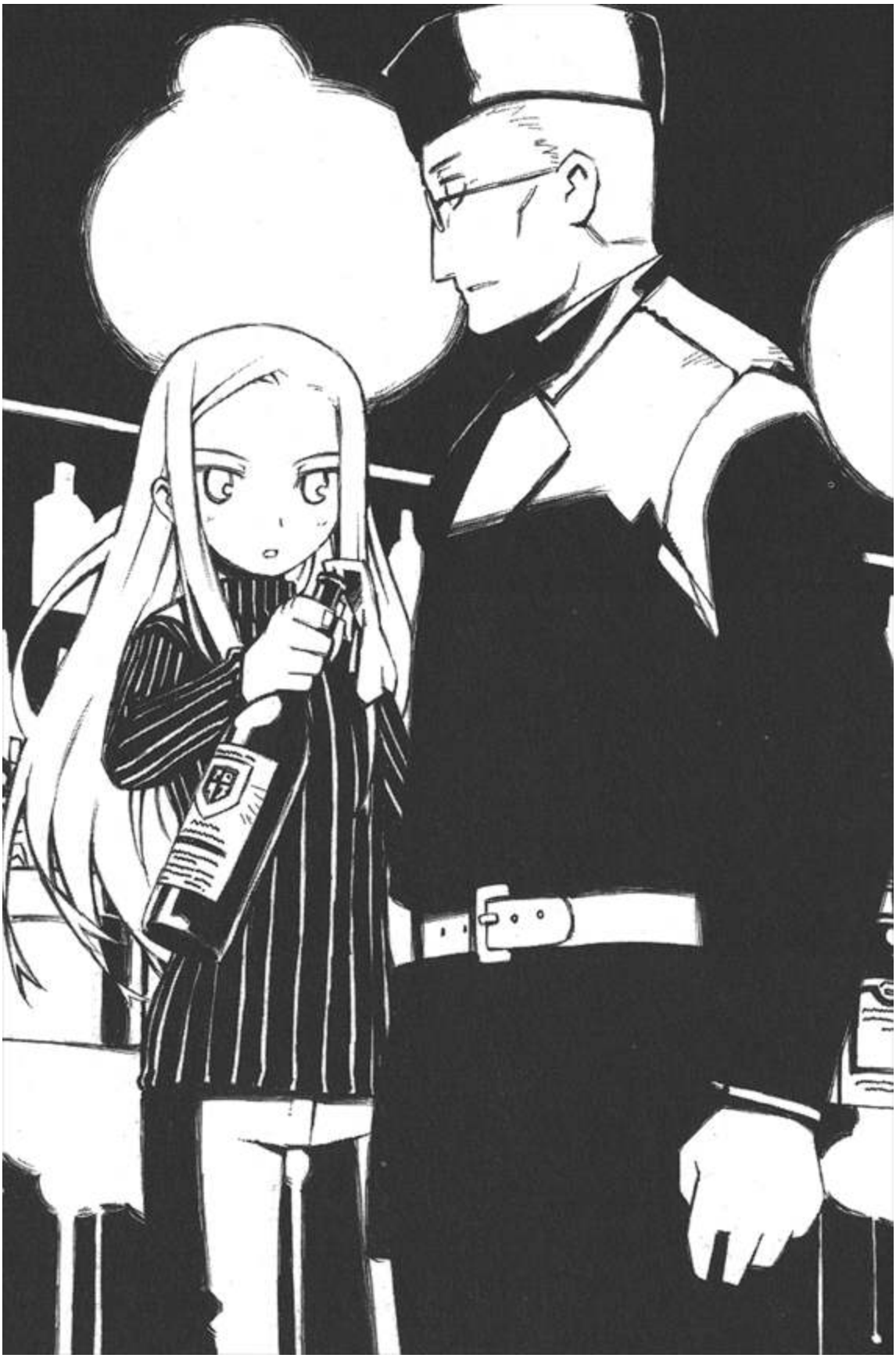
Major Stork smiled at the flames, satisfied. He turned and headed to the exit to get to the coupling. With his left hand, he held the doorknob, and with his right hand, he drew his gun, took aim at the window, and pulled the trigger several times.

“This is payment!”

The glass shattered to pieces. Fresh air rushed inside, providing oxygen to the car.

Finally, he shot the makeshift petrol bomb lying on the floor.

As Major Stork holstered his gun and left out the door, flames scattered behind him and lit up the pools of alcohol, trembling in a dizzying dance. The flames dyed red the frosted-glass pane on the door.



The transcontinental express continued down the tracks, grey smoke spewing from the very last car. The flames quickly swallowed everything in its path. The grand piano was already engulfed, looking much like a sculpture of fire.

The military train, which was hot on the transcontinental's tail, was overwhelmed by smoke the moment it reached a straight stretch of rails. The soldier manning one of the machine guns by the locomotive began to cough violently.

The soldier next to him, who supplied ammunition, ducked and yelled loudly.

"Hey, where the hell'd you shoot?"

The soldier manning the machine gun also ducked as he answered.

"I just shot the roof! Orders were just to intimidate them!"

"Shit! They must've set it on fire from the inside." The other soldier swore, and added, "Hasn't he taken over the train yet? What's the major doing?"

Major Stork was walking. He was heading toward the four people standing at the door into the back of the dining car—in other words, near the coupling. Because the train was moving, the smoke did not reach them.

"It's burning quite nicely. Train fires really are terrifying. In any case, they won't be able to board so easily now." Major Stork reported in a relaxed tone.

"The fire won't spread to this car?" Asked Benedict.

"It might, if we do nothing. Wooden cars are quite flammable."

Benedict frowned, but did not respond. Major Stork continued.

"But we won't let that happen."

"Then what will we do, Major? They're going to catch up to us eventually."

"They're running along the same tracks as we are. So all we have to do is create an obstacle. That will solve two problems at once." Major Stork replied immediately.

"How?" Asked Wil.

"It's simple—"

Before he could even finish, Allison cut in.

"We just separate the burning car."

"Correct."

Major Stork gave Allison a smile and a thumbs-up.

"Separate the cars? That's easy to say, but—"

"It's not like you drink, Wil. And besides, the car's all burned anyway, so we don't need it anymore."

"No, I mean… what if that train crashes into the lounge car? They're going to—"

"It doesn't matter. Who cares if they get derailed or something? Serves 'em right for cutting my trip short."

"You're really angry right now, aren't you?"

"Of course I am! Those SOBs keep butting in on our tour!"

"'Allison, let's remember to use nice words'."

"Sorry, Grandma… Anyway, they keep interrupting our tour!"

The four of them had left Fiona in the dining car and come to the coupling between the dining car and the lounge. There was a thin layer of smoke there as well. Major Stork was carrying his suitcase, which he had quickly brought back from the car just earlier.

"Ahem. Miss Allison? Wilhelm? May I begin?"

"Yes."

"Sure!"

Wil and Allison replied.

"Then allow me to explain. We must separate the cars at the coupling here. First, let's pull off this cover." Major Stork said, pointing at a fastener on the coupling. Benedict undid it as instructed.

"There. Pull."

Wil and Benedict pulled on the cover as they folded it in toward the dining car. The wind howled as cold air rushed in and diluted the smoke. All that was left in the coupling were the heavy metal plates jutting out of either car.

"Next, we must pull up these plates. Please take care not to drop them or get your fingers stuck."

"I'll do it."

Holding back Wil, who tried to step in, Benedict lifted the weighty plate with both hands. He dragged the plate on the lounge side toward the dining car, and the one on the dining car side toward himself.

There was a gap of several dozen centimeters between the cars. Metal rails and wooden railroad ties passed underneath.

"Major Stork… can we unclasp these connectors?" Benedict asked, raising his head. Allison and Wil took turns looking down. The connectors were equipped with sturdy metal rings,

and were firmly affixed to the rings on either car. There were also screws driven between the rings so the connectors would not move.

“Not while we’re moving, I’m afraid.”

“Then how—”

“Do you see the hose on the right side? That hose carries air for the brakes. Turn the red knob on the side of the dining car to cut off the air supply. We just need to cut it off on this side. Watch out that you don’t get your arm jammed between the buffers.”

Giving instructions, Major Stork reached into his suitcase. Benedict asked Allison and Wil to hold his legs, and lay on his stomach in front of the connectors. Then, he cautiously reached down and turned the valve 90 degrees.

“Whew… Thank you.”

Thanking his friends, Benedict sat up. The sleeves of his sweater and his chest were stained with grease.

“What now? We can’t separate the cars unless we uncouple the connectors.”

“The fire’s spread out a lot.” Allison commented. Wil looked up. The lounge car they could see through the tiny window was filled with nothing but red. Even the edges of the door were ominously tinted black.

“It’s my turn.” Said Major Stork, who had put his suitcase on the carpet as he fished through it. He slowly drew out his hand. In his grasp was a thick grey paper box, about three centimeters high and ten centimeters long. It looked much like a box of butter one might find at a store, but there was nothing written on it. Major Stork placed the box onto the carpet.

“Hm? Don’t tell me—”

Benedict was in shock. Major Stork removed a cylinder shaped like a large fountain pen, and gingerly removed something that resembled a metal pen from within. He scrutinized the object as he rotated the lid several times.

“What is that?” Asked Allison. Benedict replied.

“The box is for the latest in military-use explosives. That thing that looks like a pen in a miniature timed fuse.”

“Huh?”

“Please give me a minute. I can’t take my eyes off this at the moment.” Said Major Stork as he adjusted the pen and held it tightly in his right hand. He then reached with his left hand into his suitcase.

“What is it this time?” Allison asked, amused.

“This.”

What Major Stork produced with a smile was a cloth tape sold at general stores to pack cargo.

“Aww, that’s not cool.”

“But it is quite useful.” Major Stork said, tossing the tape to Benedict.

“Put a strip horizontally on the lounge car’s connector. But leave room to insert the fuse.”

Then came the explosive. Benedict took it in his left hand, with the tape in his right.

“Will it be all right?”

“There might be a bit of an impact, but it won’t cause too much damage. At least, we won’t be derailed. If my calculations and memory are correct.”

Benedict shook his head, dumbfounded, and put some tape over the explosive. Then he turned to Allison and Wil.

“Both of you, stand back. Just in case.”

“Nah. This looks pretty interesting.”

Wil did not answer. As he and the enthusiastic Allison watched, Benedict fixed the explosive to the connector and wrapped tape over it.

“Done. If you’ll excuse me, we’ll be fleeing first.” Benedict said, pushing Allison and Wil into the car.

“Understood. I’ll follow shortly.”

Major Stork squatted in front of the explosive and held onto the train with his left hand. He leaned forward with his right hand outstretched and carefully stuck the pen into the explosive.

“Please don’t let this be defective.” He whispered, lightly tapping the end of the pen.

“Fi! It’s risk—er, dangerous, so go to the front! He’s going to explode the coupling!” Benedict cried. Fi gasped and began to run. Benedict quickly caught up to her.

“What’s going on here?”

“I had a small idea, but that major is too unbelievable!”

“You think so? He looks pretty fun to me.” Allison commented, following behind.

Soon, the four of them arrived at the very front of the dining car. When they turned, Major Stork emerged from the opposite end with his suitcase in hand. He looked very much like a middle-aged soldier returning home from work. He calmly reached behind himself to close the door and walked inside.

As the four watched, Major Stork stretched his right arm to the side and folded his thumb. A second later, his pointer finger. Then, his middle finger.

Benedict squatted to the floor with Fiona in his embrace, and took hold of the handrail by the windowsill. Wil and Allison quickly ducked as well.

The moment Major Stork folded his pinky finger, he turned and landed lightly on his backside.

Boom.

With a dull impact, the dining car shook as though having been rammed. There was only one noise and one impact, however. Soon, the car was once more enveloped in the sounds and shaking of the wheels.

"Didn't I tell you that things would be all right?"

Major Stork quickly stood. He opened the window on the right side fully and stuck out his head to check behind them. Allison quickly did the same. Wil, Benedict, and Fiona ran up to the windows as well.

"Success."

Behind them along the gentle curve was a familiar car, quickly growing distant as it continued to spew smoke. It almost looked like it was moving backwards.

"When we separated the cars, the hose for the braking system was separated from the train. That triggered the emergency brakes on the lounge car." Major Stork explained, looking out the window. Beyond the burning car they could see the military train, running down the same tracks.

"So long!" Allison cheered, waving her arm.

The military train quickly braked. But the burning car approached it as though drawn by gravity and finally crashed. There was no noise.

For a short time, the military train pushed the lounge car forward. Neither of them were derailed, but they slowed down greatly. In the blink of an eye, they were dots in the distance across the valley, only visible by the smoke rising into the air.

The five heads sticking out of the dining car withdrew one after another.

"Now they'll be immobilized for some time. We'll be in the clear."

"You're pretty good, mister." Allison said, grinning.

"Thank you, Miss."

Major Stork placed a hand over his chest and bowed.

"Shit! Get that car out of the way. Can't we at least push it to the next turn-out?"

"No, sir. We can't disarm the emergency brake."

"In any case, extinguish that fire! Then blow it up and off the tracks!"

“But we don’t have any explosives, sir…”

“Then use manpower and push it off!”

“Please be reasonable, sir…”

The train was stopped at a slight distance from the burning lounge car. The soldiers in balaclavas watched the roaring flames and the unending smoke enveloping the car. The little fire extinguishers in their hands could not possibly put out the fire, and the heat was so intense that they could not even get close.

The man who had been barking orders swore again.

“Damn it! What the hell is going on here? It’s odd that we’d face this much resistance to taking him into custody… if they manage to reach the village, we’re finished.”

The man’s unfortunate subordinate spoke up hesitantly.

“What do we do now, sir?”

“Where are the MPs in charge of cleanup? Where’s First Lieutenant Klein?”

“We’ve just received word that they would land and join Squad 2. If things work out, they’ll manage to catch them.”

“Then it’s all up to them… Shit!”

The fire on the lounge car crackled at times as it grew more and more intense.

* * *

“Yes. They’ve begun attempts to sabotage us. I’m sad to say that there are criminals hiding in our military. We’ve managed to drive them back, so I believe things will be all right now.”

In the conductor’s cabin at the end of the dining car, Major Stork was sitting in a chair with a headset over his ears, speaking with an engineer via radio. The others stood silently and watched.

“As I said earlier, we must reach the village at all costs. Do *not* slow down. Run down any obstacles you may face. That includes people.”

They were cruel words to be said in such a mechanical tone.

“Fortune be with you.”

With that, Major Stork ended communications. He turned off the switch, took off the headset, and turned. Benedict was shooting him a vicious glare.

Major Stork followed the others back to the dining car. First, everyone got seated. Four in a row, and one across from them.

Benedict gave a pronounced frown as he addressed Major Stork.

“Major. I have a few questions.”

“Yes?”

“Does your hometown make a tradition of traveling with explosives in suitcases?”

Major Stork did not so much as twitch at the obvious provocation. Instead, he smiled.

“I told you before. My mission is to act as security detail. I only brought it along to use in an emergency.”

“Do you think we’ll actually believe that?”

“I hope you will.”

“That is *not* an answer!” Benedict raised his voice. Allison warned him for the third time that day.

“Stop fighting!”

Benedict sighed.

Hearing Wil’s interpretation, Fiona spoke up slowly.

“Benedict. We’ll solve this problem once we reach the village.”

“I understand. Yes.”

Benedict raised his right hand and gave Major Stork a light salute. Then, he sighed again and turned his gaze to the thick carpet. Fiona placed a hand on his shoulder.

Major Stork slowly stood and went to the window. He opened the curtains and glanced at the valley on the right side of the car, then down at his watch.

“Things will be all right now as long as nothing happens.”

“Isn’t that what you said earlier?” Allison chuckled. Wil was silently watching the major.

“Did I?” Major Stork gave an embarrassed grin and leaned partly out the window. The jagged stone peaks across the valley were still covered in snow swirling in geometric patterns.

“What a beautiful sight. It’s one of our country’s valuable treasures.”

Allison got up and tugged on Wil’s hand.

“Let’s watch the scenery together.”

Wil smiled and followed. They stepped around the table and went to the window. Major Stork watched them without a word.

Allison tied the curtain open and watched the world pass by alongside Wil.

“What do you think?” She asked in Roxchean.

“It’s beautiful. I’m so glad I came on this trip.”

“Even after what happened?”

“Yeah.”

“Great.”

Fiona watched Allison and Wil standing side-by-side by the window and smiled. Suddenly, her gaze was drawn to Major Stork’s face.

He was silent; with his mouth shut and his gaze averted, he watched the two of them with a rather lonely look. Though they stood in the same car, it looked for all the world as though an iron wall were between Major Stork and the two. Fiona watched them for a time. The world outside the window was clear and beautiful, but she forgot even to watch the landscape.

Soon, having thought of something, Fiona reached for the camera bag on her belt.

“…”

But in the end, she did not take out her camera, letting her hand drop without a sound.

“Are you cold? Can I open the window?” Allison asked Wil. Wil soon pulled down the top half of the window himself.

There was a gust of wind, and Allison’s hair went aflutter. Her golden hair smothered Wil’s face.

“Whoa.”

“Oh, sorry. Let’s switch spots.”

Allison pulled Wil over and stepped back, trading positions.

“You two,” Major Stork began. Wil and Allison turned. “Well… you’re very close, I see.”

Allison was slightly surprised, but she grinned.

“Where’d that come from?”

“Nothing, Miss. It just occurred to me, that’s all. Please don’t mind me. Enjoy the view.”

Major Stork pointed at the opposite side of the valley, about three hundred meters away. The slopes were still as steep as ever, but they seemed to be closer to sea level than before; trees and plants dotted the area. Under the valley full of boulders flowed a small river.

“It’s beautiful.” Allison commented.

“The tracks follow the path of the river for some time. And in a short while, we’ll be passing a long, narrow lake in the valley. It’s a natural dam that was created by a massive

avalanche in the distant past. It’s renowned for its calm, blue water.” Major Stork explained, playing the tour guide. “About three hundred years ago, rumors that gold dust could be found there began to spread, drawing countless people to the area. The gold was quickly depleted, and the people’s dreams of golden paradise were dashed. But some still believe that a massive quantity of gold lies in wait at the bottom of the lake.”

“Huh.” Allison watched the scenery as she played along. “Can I ask you something, Mr. Tour Guide?”

“Of course.”

“Are there tracks on the other side of the valley?”

“Hm? Oh, yes. There are tracks everywhere in this area. But the other side is very steep—much of the tracks are inside tunnels to prevent damage from avalanches.”

“I see.”

“Why did you ask?”

“Well,” Allison replied, “I just saw some holes on the other side.”

“Ah, yes. Those holes provide air to the tunnels. Relics from times when all locomotives ran on steam. But I must say, your eyesight is quite incredible.”

“Can I ask one more thing?”

“By all means.”

“There’s no roads there, right?”

“No.” Major Stork replied, looking at Allison with a smile. Allison met his gaze.

“Then what’s that thing that just came out of the tunnel? It looks like a tank.”

Chapter 7: Across the Valley

"—It looks like a tank."

The moment the words hit his ears, Major Stork fell to the floor and reached both hands into his suitcase. Benedict and Fiona—who had raised their heads at the major's actions—and Allison and Wil watched as Stork withdrew a small pair of binoculars. He knelt on the carpet as he raised his glasses onto his forehead and looked out the window with his eyes pressed to the binoculars.

Three seconds later.

Major Stork turned with a vexed scowl. Benedict glared at him.

"What now?"

"First Lieutenant Klein. We've found the transcontinental express. It's currently running down the main tracks across the valley."

"Confirmed. Squad 1 is missing, just as noted. What could have happened? …Can we catch up at that speed?"

"Yes, sir. We're faster than they are, and they'll also have to slow to a crawl at the turn before the bridge crossing."

"Things will be difficult for us if they make it past the bridge. We must stop them before it, if at all possible. Prepare the flares and radios."

"Yes, sir. And what if the train refuses to comply with orders?"

"Then we can only assume that the major has failed. We will, unfortunately, have to abort the mission."

"Specifically…"

"We ignore the well-being of the target and kill all those aboard the train. We will pass them and install a derailing mechanism to the tracks, toppling the train over. Drop all injured into the valley. If we are fortunate enough to find the target alive, we bring the target back with us. That is all. We have no reason to dirty our hands."

"…Understood, sir."

"If looks like we'll have to take the 'discovery' into our own hands. What a joke."

Visible through a set of round lenses was a single vehicle moving along the northern side of the valley.

It resembled a tank. The vehicle was about six meters long and was about three meters tall and wide. The chassis was wedge-shaped and covered in metal plates, which were painted in camouflaging greens and browns. On top was a cylindrical gun turret. The barrel of a

machine gun was sticking out of it. On either side of the bottom of the vehicle were caterpillar tracks used by tanks and tractors.

The caterpillars were still, as though the vehicle was parked. But the tank was moving.

Underneath the vehicle was not a road, but a set of tracks. Instead of the caterpillar tracks, the tank was running down them on the railway-use wheels equipped to its underside. Like an independent locomotive, the train moved down the rails. In both the front and the back, sets of buffers and connectors jutted out like horns.

"What is that?" Wil asked Major Stork, lowering the binoculars.

"It's a tank, isn't it?" Replied Allison from beside him.

"But it's running down train tracks."

"Maybe it's a specialized tank."

From the back of the train, Wil, Allison, Fiona, Benedict, and Major Stork knelt in a line beside the dining car's right-side windows with their heads poking out of the closed curtains. Wil, who was last to look through the binoculars, handed them to Allison. It was passed from Allison to Fiona to Benedict. As Benedict handed it back to Major Stork, he said firmly,

"Please answer the question."

"All right. As the young lady noticed, that vehicle is a sort of tank—to be specific, an armored railcar." Major Stork replied, defeated.

"An armored railcar?" Allison repeated.

"Yes. It's a special armored vehicle that can move on land with caterpillar tracks and run along the rails with the wheels equipped on its underside. They finally succeeded in creating this vehicle quite recently. It's an excellent and useful vehicle that can be used for scouting and security anywhere, whether roads or rails." Major Stork explained.

"Enough with the bragging. What is a vehicle like that doing here?"

"At this point, I'm not certain."

The moment Major Stork answered, the hatch on the armored railcar opened and a flare was lit. The same green light as before flew into the valley in a trail of white smoke.

At the same time, a dull impact rocked the car. Everyone held onto the handrails, trying to avoid a fall. The train began screeching to a slow.

"I *told* them not to do this!"

Major Stork leapt to his feet and headed for the conductor's cabin with his suitcase dragging behind.

"In whatever case, I cannot believe that person." Benedict grumbled in Roxchean. He and the others followed after Stork. He was sitting on the chair in the cabin, hanging onto the radio.

"I believe I told you not to slow down."

Benedict reached over and flicked a switch. The panicked voice of an engineer left the speaker.

<B-but sir, we've received orders to slow down via radio from the armored vehicle. Please switch channels and ask them yourself.>

<Understood.> Major Stork said briefly, then turned the dial and changed frequencies. A male voice escaped the speaker.

<This is the armored railcar. Whoever is in charge of the transcontinental express, respond. I repeat—>

As four people watched, Major Stork sighed and took hold of the microphone switch.

"This is Major Stork of the Royal Army, currently aboard the transcontinental express. Who am I speaking to?"

Several seconds later, a reply came from the speaker.

<This is First Lieutenant Klein from the military police.>

"What's an MP doing here?" Benedict mumbled, frowning.

"So… he's a police officer for the military?" Fiona asked when Wil interpreted for her. Wil nodded.

"First Lieutenant. Due to urgent reasons, this train has been split and many of its passengers left behind. We are trying to reach the village at the base of the mountains as fast as we can. Currently, there are two passengers in the VIP car and four behind me. The four are listening to this conversation." Major Stork explained. Several seconds later came a response.

<Understood. We are acting according to recent intel that a rogue faction of the military is planning an attempt on the VIP passenger's life. We are attempting to protect the VIP. Are the passengers unharmed?>

Major Stork glanced at the others and raised a thumb as though asking them what they wanted him to do.

"They are. In fact, I'd like to request cover from your end."

<Understood. About thirty kilometers ahead is a lake and a bridge. We'll connect your tracks to ours at the bridge, so come to a stop just before you reach it. We'll join you there.>

"Of course. We'll proceed slowly until that point, so please watch our route—both ahead and behind. Set off a red flare if anything should come up."

<Understood.>

"Thank you. Perhaps we should all go for tea at the village once you've finished your duties. On me, of course."

<That sounds excellent. If you'll excuse us, then.>

"It's done. The major seems to be mostly on track. But what in the world is Squad 1 doing?"

"Maybe their locomotive had a breakdown, sir."

"You might be right. Anyway, that doesn't matter. We'll proceed with the plan without them. Continue down the tracks alongside the train until we reach the bridge. Watch their route ahead and behind—but don't get too serious. No one is coming, anyway."

"Yes, sir."

After speaking to the soldiers, Major Stork switched back to the engineers and ordered them to continue slowly until the bridge. When the engineers accepted the orders, the major turned off the radio and stood.

"Shall we return to the dining car?"

Unlike before, the train was moving down the tracks at a relaxed pace. The shaking and the noise were much quieter.

The five of them returned to the dining car and the chairs they had practically claimed for themselves. Major Stork opened the curtains slightly and looked at the vehicle on the other side of the valley.

"Are we going to be okay now?" Fiona wondered.

"Maybe we are. If the military police is in this case, this suspicious major might be telling the truth really." Benedict replied in Roxchean.

"There's something I'd like to ask of all of you now." Major Stork said as he watched Benedict and Fiona, getting out of his seat. He was as calm as though he were asking for help redecorating the car. Four sets of eyes turned to him. Benedict spoke first.

"What is it?"

"I just need your assistance with something. I would like to request your unified efforts."

"What are you planning…?"

"We are going to take down that armored vehicle." Major Stork replied.

There were five seconds of stunned silence.

"What did you just say?" Benedict asked.

"Major Stork's just asked us to help destroy the armored vehicle…" Wil told Fiona, interpreting.

"Are you out of your mind, Major? We've just been offered protection—not by just anyone, but the military police!"

“I am still sane, Major Carr. And before you ask, I am not drunk.” Major Stork replied, reaching for his belt and pulling out his gun. He slowly raised it toward Benedict.

“I am still *quite* sane.”

His hand stopped in midair. The gun was pointed at the ceiling. If he were to lower his arm even a little, he would be able to shoot Benedict with ease.

“A surprising claim.”

Benedict pulled Fiona close and glared at Major Stork. Wil and Allison watched them from the side. Major Stork glanced at them—his eyes were cold and determined.

“Major Carr. Future Queen Francesca. And Wilhelm and Miss Allison. If you don’t wish to die, you must believe me. You must do as I say.”

“Is this a threat?” Asked Benedict.

“No. No, it is not. Think of it more as a warning, closer to a word of caution. I do not wish to see you dead.”

“To be honest, I have no idea what you are doing.” Benedict said, slowly reaching for his side. But his hand found nothing.

“You gave your gun to that boy earlier.”

“Right… I’d forgotten completely.”

Benedict and Major Stork’s gazes turned to Wil.

“Right. Wil, you’re the one with the gun. So go ahead and do something with it.” Allison advised. Her tone defied the tension in the air.

“I can’t point a gun at someone without a good reason.” Wil replied. Major Stork nodded.

“You are absolutely correct.”

“You have no right to be saying that.” Benedict argued the moment Major Stork replied. The major replied with his gun still pointed overhead.

“I ask that you trust me, if only for today. If you do not wish to die on this train, I need everyone’s support.”

“What do you want us to do?” Wil asked. Benedict hissed in Roxchean.

“Wil. This man is certainly hiding some things.”

Wil’s answer was immediate.

“I agree. But that’s true of us as well. Ever since that day.”

Benedict was silent.

“We’ll hear him out for the moment. Fiona, could you wait for a bit? We’ll explain everything later.”

Wil then turned to Major Stork and asked in Bezelese.

“Major Stork. What do you want us to do?”

Stork nodded.

“Let me explain. We must render that armored railcar impotent before we cross the bridge. If they get in our way as we merge onto one track, we are finished. We will be helpless to resist.”

“Why?”

“I can’t say at the moment. But if we don’t do as I say, our lives are forfeit.”

Benedict was skeptical.

“You want us to believe that? To be frank, I’d like to hand you over to the MPs before I end up accomplice to a conspiracy.”

“Feel free to do so—*after* we’ve reached the village.” Major Stork replied firmly. Benedict scowled.

“In other words,” Wil continued, “you can’t tell us your reasons, but you want us to trust you?”

“Yes. And there is no time to waste.”

As though scrutinizing a keyhole, Wil silently gazed into Major Stork’s blue eyes. Major Stork did not look away, looking back at Wil’s brown eyes.

“I understand. I’ll trust you. Tell us what we should do.” Wil answered. Benedict sighed and shook his hands in disbelief. Major Stork’s eyes narrowed.

“Thank you. Then from now on, we will attempt to destroy or at least render powerless the armored railcar across the valley.”

“That’s easy to say, but how’re we going to do it?” Asked Allison.

“We will shoot it down.”

“With that gun?”

Major Stork shook his head and holstered his gun.

“No. We will go get our weapon now.”

“Huh. Going to get it.” Allison mumbled, then added, “where?”

The five people were walking down the galley corridor, headed for the front of the train.

At the head of the line was Major Stork. He had left his suitcase in the conductor's office and was empty-handed. Behind him were Allison and Wil, and behind them were Fiona and Benedict.

They passed the galley and the VIP room and entered the freight car. In the hallway, which was on the left side of the car, were two doors leading into the holds. The one nearby led into the passenger cargo hold, and the one closer to the front led into the VIP passenger cargo hold. The sturdy metal doors were chained shut and secured with large locks.

"In here."

"You have a key, right?" Allison asked.

"For security purposes, yes." Major Stork replied. He took out a key from inside his jacket, opened the lock, and threw the chain to the floor. Then he began pushing at the door.

"This is quite heavy. If someone could lend me a hand—ah, thank you."

Benedict reached out without saying a word. The heavy door creaked open and was locked into open position so the shaking of the train would not close it.

Just like the other hold had been in the morning, the VIP hold was filled with mounds of cargo covered in cloth.

Major Stork began to pull off the cloth, revealing many wooden crates. They were of various sizes, secured with ropes and piled neatly one on top of another. There was nothing to signify the contents, save for tiny numbers printed on the corners.

"The smaller crates may fall if the train shakes. Please take care."

With that, Major Stork began to haphazardly unknot the ropes. Benedict joined in. When the major asked for a dolly, Allison and Wil detached a cart that was fixed beside the hold. It was a small cart with two wheels, made to transport objects positioned to lean toward the handles.

"We'll have to lift this, Major Carr. Lend me a hand."

Major Stork was pointing at a large wooden crate about two meters long and fifty centimeters wide and tall. Benedict, lifting it with the major's help, grimaced at the weight.

"Is this, by any chance, a giant's coffin? It must weigh well over eighty kilograms."

"It's no coffin. And please take care not to drop it."

They brought the box down from the pile and loaded it onto the cart that Wil and Allison had brought. Benedict, who was holding the lower part, had to use much more strength than Major Stork.

Major Stork expertly secured the crate to the cart. Then, he left Benedict the laborious task of pushing the cart to the dining car while giving Fiona a crowbar for opening the crate and instructions to go ahead and open the doors for them.

"You two, please take those crates."

Wil and Allison were assigned smaller crates, about a meter long and thirty centimeters wide and tall. However, they were much heavier than they looked. They each took one end and followed after Fiona and Benedict.

Major Stork followed after them empty-handed.

“Look who’s got a lot of room on their hands.” Allison said snidely, glancing at him.

“It’s because I have to go to the VIP cabin and warn our incredibly valuable patron to remain inside. Please, go on without me. And start by opening up the smaller crate.”

Splitting from the others at the VIP car, Major Stork waited for them to disappear from view before banging loudly on the door to the bodyguard lounge.

“It’s me. Open up, please.”

Soon came the sound of the lock being unlocked as the door opened. Major Stork pushed aside Ien—who was armed with a gun—as he stepped inside, closing the door and locking it. He turned to the stoic Ien with a piercing glare.

“Where is Mr. Terreur?”

“The Master is inside.”

“There’s something I must tell him now. Please let me inside immediately.”

Ien said nothing, but finally opened the door into the cabin and led Major Stork inside. Terreur, who was drinking on his sofa, grumbled as he looked up.

“I don’t know where they caught our trail, but the military police is here to arrest us.” Stork said, irritated. “There is a tank driving parallel to us across the valley. Ien, interpretation!”

Slightly cowed by Stork’s tone, Ien quickly interpreted his words into Roxchean. Terreur’s expression faltered.

“What?”

Before Ien could even interpret, Major Stork replied sharply with his voice half-raised.

“We’ve just received radio contact from them. I’ve managed to come up with excuses and buy us time, but at this rate we will all be taken into custody. Shit! Just where was this information leak?” He swore, shooting a sidelong glare at Ien. It was clear he suspected him.

Ien said nothing. He interpreted Major Stork’s words for Terreur.

“Wh-what are we to do, then?” Terreur stuttered, unable to hide his anxiety.

“We have no choice but to take them down. Even if it means killing them all.”

“What? But… they are military police, are they not?”

“That is of little concern to me. Our organization is capable of covering it all up.”

"Is that so? A relief to hear. But how will you stop the military police?"

"I'll be borrowing some of your cargo, Mr. Terreur. In fact, I've already begun preparations. I've managed to deceive Major Carr and his companions somehow, so I must go back and continue to lead them now."

"By 'cargo'… are you thinking what I am thinking? Are you quite sane, my man?"

"*Quite*. If we are caught here, we will be put on trial by both Roxche and Sou Be-Il. Do you *want* for that to happen? You and I both will become enemies of the world."

"Of course…" Terreur replied. Major Stork smiled. His grin was suave, like that of a skilled salesman visiting his client.

"There is nothing to worry about, Mr. Terreur. We are almost in the clear. We will forcibly remove all obstacles in our path, no matter how many lives are lost on the way."

"Though unlikely, we must prepare for the possibility of snipers being deployed. Do *not* leave your cabin. Keep your curtains shut. And do not open the door for anyone other than myself. If you'll excuse me, I have some lives to take."

With that, Major Stork left the cabin.

"That man is insane." Terreur muttered.

Ien was silent, his stony gaze fixed on the closed door.

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting."

When Major Stork arrived at the dining car at the end of the train, Benedict was just opening up the smaller crate with the crowbar, grumbling under his breath.

"Damn it. I came here for a relaxing vacation."

The tables had been cleared; boxes small and large littered the empty floor.

"Thank you for your efforts." Said Major Stork. Benedict did not even turn as he curtly gave a word of thanks.

Major Stork peered out through the curtains toward the other side of the valley. The armored railcar was moving slowly, keeping pace with the train.

Soon, Benedict removed all the nails from the crate and tossed the lid aside.

The crate was filled with balled-up newspapers. When Wil and Benedict cleared them away, a gun emerged.

"Incredible…" Benedict gasped, taking up the gun. It was about a meter in length. It was a pump-action shotgun with a tube-shaped magazine fixed under the barrel. Mounted atop the shotgun's characteristically thick barrel was a heatshield ridden with holes.

Benedict pulled on the fore grip to check that the gun was not loaded.

"It's certainly no toy."

"The slugs are here. Please load them later." Said Major Stork, handing him a safe-shaped box with handles that was next to the crate. Benedict placed it on the floor and opened the lid. It was filled with cylindrical slugs.

Major Stork began to open up the other large box. He expertly pulled out the nails one after another and opened the three-section lid.

"Wake up, now. It's time for some action." He said cheerfully, removing the balls of newspaper and boards that supported the contents. Wil and Benedict quickly joined in. When the box was cleared, both Wil and Benedict gasped.

Like the other box, this one was also occupied by a gun that took up most of its space. Allison peered inside from next to Wil.

"What is this?"

"As you can see, it is a gun. A rifle."

With that, Major Stork instructed Benedict to lift one end of the rifle. The two of them lifted the gun together, each holding up one end.

"Shit. Talk about heavy."

"It weighs about fifty kilograms. Please try not to hurt your back."

From the case they pulled a gigantic gun that was a whopping two meters long.

Like any other gun, the barrel and the firing mechanism were attached to the chassis. It had a grip, a trigger, a large sniping scope, and a stock for securing the gun to the shoulder and cheek when firing.

However, in terms of size the gun was so enormous that it could have been used by a giant. The barrel alone—about as thick as a factory pipe—was twice the length of longer guns. The end of the barrel, riddled with holes that expelled gas, looked much like a harmonica.

Underneath the body was equipped a large frame. It was composed of two metal legs attached to gigantic sled-shaped movable slides that a person could probably wear on their feet. Further ahead was another frame that secured the gun when it was fired.

With a dull thud the gun was placed onto the carpet. The grip and two slides balanced it upright.

"Phew… what in the world is this? I've never seen a gun so enormous." Benedict said, astonished. Major Stork said nothing, but took out a metal box from the wooden crate. It was about thirty centimeters long and wide, and had the appearance of a lunchbox big enough for several people.

"The magazines. We just have to equip them on top of the gun."

"That doesn't matter right now, Major. Answer the question. What in the world is this gun?"

Major Stork finally answered.

“It’s the Roxchean military’s latest anti-tank rifle.”

“An *anti-tank rifle*? This?”

“Yes. Although it’s not quite enough for the latest and largest tank models, it’s sufficient for taking care of light tanks and armored vehicles. If we snipe covertly with this weapon, I’m quite certain we’ll see results.”

“I feel almost foolish for asking, but… what caliber?”

“20 millimeters.”

With that answer, Major Stork opened the magazine case, took out a round, and showed it to Benedict. It was twenty millimeters in diameter—a gigantic round that looked rather like a half bottle of wine with copper leaf.

“Is it all right for a person to fire one of these?” Benedict wondered, his astonished gaze on the round so large that it would not fit in his hands. Twenty millimeters was the size of rounds used for aeroplane-mounted machine guns.

“That *is* how it’s designed, at least. Although I can’t be sure, as I haven’t tried using it myself.” Major Stork replied firmly. “But this gun is our only hope of resolving this situation. If we can use it to render the enemy powerless, we will emerge victorious,”

“Twenty millimeters… I suppose it will be enough, provided that it hits. But who will be the shooter? You, since you brought it up?” Asked Benedict. Major Stork shook his head.

“I must observe the impact through the binoculars, I’m afraid. You’ll have to take the gun.”

“It feels quite silly to say this, but I’m not very confident in my rifle skills.”

“Then is there anyone *else* who could take this role?” Major Stork said sarcastically. At that moment, Benedict glanced at the boy standing next to Allison. Allison did the same.

“Why are you looking at me?” Wil asked. A second later,

“It’s decided, then.”

“It sure is.”

At the back of the dining car, which had been cleared of tables and chairs.

“Shoot the portions I indicated with the tape. There’s no need to be gentle.”

Major Stork had marked out several areas in square frames of duct tape under the window.

“Talk about violent. Everyone, stand back.” Benedict said, stepping up to the wall with the loaded shotgun.

Allison and Fiona had fled to the center of the dining car, and Major Stork was standing in front of them. Wil was beside them, desperately reading through the simplified manual for the anti-tank rifle.

Benedict checked once more to see that no one was around, and pulled the fore grip. There was a dry, metallic click as the first round was loaded.

"A wall this time, huh. Don't think I can pay it off, either."

He placed the shotgun on his shoulder and pulled the trigger. The lead round, which contained nine pellets, blew a large hole in the wooden wall. Splinters flew everywhere.

Little by little, Benedict continued to destroy the train. He pulled on the pump to empty the cartridges, loaded again, and pulled the trigger. After five consecutive shots, he took out more rounds from the box underfoot and loaded them into the gun.

"For your information, that is one of the Roxchean Army's trench guns."

Benedict paused in the middle of loading his shotgun, but quickly resumed.

"I have no idea why you would say something like that in the middle of this chaos, but for your information, I am completely unaffected."

"I see. That's good to hear."

Upon loading the gun, Benedict returned to shooting at the wall. This time, he fired even at the windows. Shards of glass scattered everywhere.

"Take this!"

Finally, he kicked at the ragged walls. The window frame dropped away from the car, and the last remaining pieces of wood fell to the floor.

Finally, there was a hole in the wall large enough for one person to pass through at a stoop. A cold breeze pushed into the dining car. Past the gaping hole passed the other side of the valley and the clear blue surface of the long, narrow lake.

"Excellent work, Major Carr. If you could reload and protect the women. Wilhelm, take this."

Major Stork handed something to Wil. It was a cloth headgear.

Other than the green-and-brown camouflage colors, it was much like a helmet used by rugby players. At the neck, where the straps were tied, was a microphone. A headphone covered the ears, and a long cable connected it through a battery to another piece of headgear.

"Put this on your head. There will be a great deal of recoil when you fire. It not only protects your ears, but it also allows you to communicate with the observer."

Wil put on the headgear and silently glanced down at the two-meter long rifle on the floor.

The gun reflected in his brown eyes was much too immense.

As Major Stork put on his headgear, Benedict went up to Wil and whispered in Roxchean.

"It is the final decision. It is not that you must trust that man's words. There is also a way of sticking to the military police."

Wil met his gaze and replied tersely.

"I'm going to do this."

"I see."

Benedict gave Wil a light punch on the shoulder and said in Bezelese.

"'Just take it easy. I know you can do it', or 'You have no room for error. There is a heavy burden resting on your shoulders'. Take your pick."

Wil grinned. Benedict smiled back, stepping away with a wave and holding the shotgun in his hand.

Major Stork finished putting on his headgear and glanced at his watch.

"Well, shall we begin? could you take that end?"

Major Stork and Wil dragged the anti-tank rifle to the hole in the wall. Sticking the thick barrel outside, they pushed the gun further outside. If they didn't, Wil's feet would touch the opposite wall when he lay beside the gun.

After deciding on a sniping location, Major Stork lowered the stand in front of the slides with his feet and set up the gun firmly on the carpet. The slides were raised several centimeters into the air.

Wil was on his stomach on the floor. He held the grip with his right hand and placed the stock against his face and his shoulder, positioning himself. It looked less like he was aiming and more like he was clinging to a giant piece of machinery.

"The basics are identical to those of a smaller rifle. You just take aim and pull the trigger. There will be a great deal of recoil, but you will be fine as long as the stock remains secure against your shoulder."

With that, Major Stork pressed the call button and asked Wil if he could hear his voice. Wil answered.

<I can hear you.>

Major Stork nodded satisfactorily. Benedict spoke up from behind.

"Er… do you mean to have Wil shoot while both trains are still in motion?"

Stork shook his head.

"Of course not. If someone could connect in these conditions, his sharpshooting skills may as well be a piece of art. If you'll excuse me for a moment, I have to go tell an incredible lie."

Stork went to the conductor’s cabin and contacted the first lieutenant on the armored railcar. He claimed that they heard strange sounds and felt unusual vibrations from the engine, and that something might be wrong with the locomotive. That the train would be slowing down, and that they would stop the train to inspect the locomotive if its condition did not improve. That the armored railcar should continue to keep watch on the train.

Then, Stork gave strict orders to the engineers of the transcontinental.

That they should slow down for the next three kilometers. That they should stop the train and trigger the whistle at a point when the tracks were as straight as possible and when the opposite side of the valley was clearly visible. That they were not to move until he ordered otherwise.

The train began to slow.

“Well, now. I suppose I should go see what Wilhelm is made of.” He mumbled cheerfully to himself, going back to the dining car.

Benedict, who had followed after him along with Allison, glanced at the radio and fell into thought.

After a moment of silence, he shook his head in denial and went back to the dining car.

Chapter 8: A Train Named Conspiracy

The 300-meter-wide valley that lay between the stone mountains was filled with blue water.

There was no wind. The surface, a darker blue than the sky, was without a single ripple. It was as though a blue gemstone had been cut and fitted into the valley.

On either side of the lake, only a meter from the water's edge, were train tracks.

On the northern track was a camouflaged armored railcar. On the opposite side was a transcontinental express train, moving at walking pace.

"It's beautiful!" Allison cried, peering out at the lake through the dining car curtains.

Wil, who lay on his stomach next to the anti-tank rifle with protective headgear on his head, watched the same scenery through the hole in the wall and mumbled to himself,

"It's beautiful…"

At that moment, Major Stork excused himself and stepped into Wil's line of sight. He fixed a magazine loaded with ten shells into the slot ahead of Wil.

"First lieutenant."

"What is it?"

"I think about this every time I pass here, but this lake is really something."

"You're right. It's one of Sou Be-Il's greatest treasures."

"Who was it that nagged us to not mess up this place again? Was it Major Stork?"

"Yes. He gets stubborn about the strangest things. Although I do agree with him on that one."

"But you know, sir. When I look at beautiful scenery like this…"

"Hm?"

"…I sometimes hate my job, just a little."

"There's no helping that. This is our mission."

Wil pulled the dreadfully heavy lever to load the gun. He pulled it all the way toward himself and then pushed it back to original position.

<Are you ready?> Major Stork's voice came through the headphones. Wil slowly peered into the scope.

There was a lone armored railcar slowly making its way over the blue lake. It was reflected upside-down in the water's surface. As Major Stork instructed, Wil aimed the scope at the

engine, which was at the back of the railcar. The chassis shook so much that he could not aim properly.

With the left hand that had been holding the scope, Wil pressed the call button.

<I'm ready. But it's still too shaky for me to take aim.>

Major Stork nodded, then gave orders to Benedict, Fiona, and Allison.

"The three of you, get to the conductor's cabin and keep your heads as close to the floor as possible."

Allison retorted, annoyed.

"I want to watch from here."

"It's too dangerous. What if they happen to return fire?"

"Then what about Wil? And you?" Allison asked back immediately.

Major Stork did not reply. Instead he gave her a silent stare.

"What?" Allison asked. Major Stork finally shook his head.

"War is the dominion of men, Miss Allison."

"Hey that's not an answer what the hell I'm in the Roxche Air Force are you trying to make fun of—"

Benedict and Fiona dragged Allison away.

Once the three of them were gone, Major Stork, who had been sitting with his elbows on the window frame and his eyes on his binoculars, turned to Wil, who was peering through the scope.

<Both this train and the railcar will soon stop. If at all possible, try to make the shot in one try. Once they realize that we're shooting, they will return fire.>

<Understood.>

There was a moment of silence. The train continued slowly. Soon, Major Stork spoke up lightheartedly.

<It seems we still have a bit of time. Don't pressure yourself.>

<Right.>

<I heard you made the rankings at a famous shooting competition. I suppose one should never judge a book by its cover. That was a compliment, for your information.>

<Thank you. And Thank you for sending Allison away, as well.>

<Ah… you're welcome. What is your relationship with her? …Er, was that an awkward question?>

<Not at all. We're childhood friends. We've grown up together since we were eight years old. Although we don't see each other very much these days.>

<Ah. Madame Corazòn's famous 'Future House'.>

<Oh. Did Allison tell you?>

<Yes. She was so fluent in Bezelese that I asked her about it. She answered my question.>

<…Allison's father died in battle at Green Island when she was eight years old. That's why she came to the Future House. At first, she cried every day, just like the other kids. She had a hard time adjusting.>

<That's unfortunate, but not surprising. I'm sure both you and Miss Allison, frankly, despise us Sou Be-Il soldiers. After all, no matter our current situation, we were once enemies. I cannot pretend otherwise.>

<Setting myself aside, I don't think Allison feels that way.>

<Why is that?>

<Her father, Major Oscar Whittington, was murdered by an ally.>

<…What do you—>

<Major Whittington fled the battlefield alongside his subordinate, who ended up taking his life. The subordinate betrayed him to save himself. The notice of death said that the two men deserted, and that it was likely that the subordinate killed the major and surrendered himself to the Western forces. Major Whittington's corpse was found several months later, but he had been shot in the head with a shotgun at very close range, and his skull was impossible to retrieve.>

<How gruesome.>

<Yes. It really is. I'd just like to ask you one last thing, Major Stork. What is your true mission?> Wil asked, taking aim at the railcar.

<You wish to know?> Major Stork replied, his eyes still pressed to the binoculars.

<Yes. Very much. I'd like to at least know the reason behind what I'm about to do.>

<Then let me tell you, in exchange for believing in me. My mission is to arrest Mr. Terreur.>

<'Arrest'? Did you just say that you would arrest Mr. Terreur?>

<That's correct. I came undercover as a contact in order to prevent him from escaping the train, so that we could place him under arrest. That is my true mission.>

<On what charges?>

<There are two. One is weapons smuggling. Which is, frankly, a minor issue.>

<If smuggling the latest in military technology is considered a minor issue, what is the second charge?>

<Crimes against humanity. I suppose you could call it 'fanning the flames of war', if you will. Not only did he commit crimes for the sake of his individual well-being, he is also attempting to personally restart the war that finally came to an end. This is an unforgivable crime. Has he no fear of the heavens?>

<…So Mr. Terreur was planning to sell out Roxche. I'd heard rumors that the Roxchean government was about to place him under arrest. Mr. Terreur must be planning to defect—no, escape—to Sou Be-Il, bringing a gift of all the military and weapons information he has, correct? In that case, Sou Be-Il would naturally be at an advantage, and certain groups could use that as a stepping stone to stir up another war.>

Major Stork, still looking through the binoculars, smiled.

<Correct. You're quite quick to grasp everything. But to be honest, this 'gift' of Mr. Terreur's in the cargo hold is nothing. Terreur plans to hand over his entire nation. And, foolishly enough, some in the Sou Be-Il military pounced on the gift like starving dogs. For our convenience, why don't we call these people 'them'? 'They' do not welcome this era of peace. 'Millions have died trying to destroy our hated enemy in the East, and what did their sacrifice amount to?', they ask. They also likely fear losing their livelihoods in the inevitable downsizing of the military. The military exists to protect the people. The people finally have a chance at a life of peace and stability, but 'they' could not accept that. They are hounds that have forgotten their masters' happiness—no, who their masters are.>

<…In other words, they refused to lie down and be killed alongside the rabbit.>

<Indeed. 'They' believe that, with the information from Roxche that Mr. Terreur can provide, that they can successfully launch an invasion on the East. And they are convinced that, once such a thing happens, the other soldiers will join their cause. Although I pray that such fools do not exist in our military, if the situation should come to pass, many innocent lives will be lost. We cannot allow the greed of masterless hounds to restart this war. It will take us some time to locate and arrest 'them'. That is why, no matter what happens, we cannot hand Mr. Terreur over to them. We will place him and his bodyguard under arrest and wring a confession out of them. To find out who exactly 'they' are so we may root them out. We must.>

<But how in the world were they planning to sneak Mr. Terreur into Sou Be-Il? If he didn't return on this train, it would be clear that he had fled. An investigation would be launched.>

<Correct. That is why, to get around that problem, 'they' hatched a terrifying plan. Here is a little riddle for you, Wilhelm. What is the best way to remove a man from existence, that no one may find him ever again?>

<Killing him.> Wil replied immediately. Major Stork nodded.

<Yes. They decided to fake Mr. Terreur's death. If it seemed that he was murdered, it might cause some problems down the line—so they had to make it seem as though he simply died. Then what are their options? Mr. Terreur must die in an accident. A train accident, for instance.>

<It can't be! You mean this entire train…?>

Wil glanced at Major Stork out of the corner of his eye. The older man spoke, his eyes never leaving the binoculars.

<Precisely. According to the intel we received, ‘they’ will deploy armed soldiers to the mountains to bring the train under their control. They will remove Mr. Terreur’s illegal cargo and Mr. Terreur himself, then push the train and all its passengers into the valley. It would be an unfortunate derailment that left none alive. No one would be suspicious about one or two missing corpses. And naturally, the list of deaths would include many rich and powerful people.>

<…They were planning to murder over forty people for just one man.>

<Yes. It is my mission to arrest Mr. Terreur and thwart that plot.>

<So is that why you murdered the conductors and the cabin crew, Major Stork?>

Several seconds passed in the wake of Wil’s question.

<The whistle hasn’t sounded yet… I admit I didn’t expect our conversation to go on so long.>

Wil could hear Major Stork’s voice in his ears. Out of the corner of his left eye, he could see the man still leaning against the window, observing the other side of the valley through his binoculars.

<You are correct. I killed them all. There was no murderer on the Roxchean side. In order to outrun ‘their’ assault, I had to speed up the train’s progress by any means necessary. We had to make it through the mountain range before their preparations were complete. But on the rails, the conductor holds absolute authority. No amount of groveling would convince him to listen to me.>

<Of course. And it wasn’t as though you could tell him the truth.>

<That is why, in order to make the passengers easily accept the splitting of the train, I created something. A killer who was after Mr. Terreur. I boarded this train with that intention. You may think me heartless if you wish. I am myself a hound of my nation.>

<I have no intention of making arguments at this point. All I want to do is keep us safe.>

<Even I had no idea that ‘they’ would attack earlier than expected. I am very glad that you and your friends are here.>

At that moment, there was a piercing whistle as the sound of the brakes screeched in their ears. The long train slowly decelerated.

<It’s time.>

<I’m ready. But there’s just one more thing I have to ask. Did Mr. Terreur… always have connections to Sou Be-Il? Were there always people in Roxche who sided with the West? Have they always been smuggling weapons in secret, betraying Roxche in the process?>

<No. When threats of a second Great War disappeared thanks to the Hero on this very train, Mr. Terreur must have done everything in his power to protect himself. But Roxche

abandoned him. That was why he decided to find a new base. Through certain methods, he got in contact with 'them'. And so came about this incident.>

<I see. He's rotten to the core.>

<But that doesn't mean you can shoot him. We still have a lot of confessions to get.> Major Stork said jokingly, and finally took his eyes off his binoculars and looked at Wil. Wil also pulled his face away from the scope and met Major Stork's blue eyes.

<This crisis is all due to my incompetent planning. I am truly sorry. So let us make sure that this shot lands. Our lives are in your hands now. I do not wish for you and the others to die.>

Wil did not answer, but nodded and looked into the scope again. Beyond the crosshairs, the movement and the vibrations slowly stopped.

<Once I give the order, fire. But first, load the gun.>

Wil tightened his hold on the grip and pulled the lever. The gigantic bolt moved forward. There was a loud, metallic noise as the gun swallowed the enormous round. The anti-tank rifle was ready to fire at any time.

Wil took a deep breath and muttered,

"Just one shot."

"We'll soon be stopping."

In the hallway by the conductor's cabin, Benedict, who was sitting against the wall with his head ducked and his feet stretched out, suddenly spoke. Next to him were Fiona and Allison, also in similar positions.

"What can I say. As the inviter for this trip, I feel responsibility. To think a case like this could happen." Benedict said.

"Don't worry about it. As long as I can share a room with Wil tonight, I won't have any complaints." Allison replied.

"First lieutenant Klein, the train should be coming to a stop soon. We'll follow suit."

"Mm. Good. The reflection of the train in the lake is something to look at."

"It certainly is. It would have been really amazing if the train were longer. Huh?"

"What's wrong?"

"Sir. That train… they said they left five cars behind at the supply base, so they should have eight left, right?"

"Yes. What is the problem?"

"This is strange…"

"What?"

"I only count seven there…"

"What…?"

"I'm sure of it."

"Five, six, seven… It's missing a car. …Shit! Get the railcar moving! Squad 1 didn't run into technical difficulties—they were attacked!"

"What?"

"You heard me! Move it! We must outrun their locomotive! Move, move, move!"

The moment the train came to a full stop.

<Now.>

Major Stork said quietly. Wil pulled the trigger.

The massive gun spewed fire.

Gas escaped the muzzle and rattled every window in the car. The pieces of wood left around the hole in the wall loudly rose into the air. The barrel was thrown upward and the stand tore through the carpet and lodged itself into the floor. Wil was pushed back by the impact. For a single second, his expression shook. The shell casing fell to the floor.

The projectile, which was two centimeters in diameter and weighed 152 grams, spun furiously as it zoomed across the blue lake. It took a mere 0.4 seconds for it to cover over three hundred meters of distance.

"What?"

The projectile passed the space where the armored railcar had been a moment ago, and landed directly on the rocky cliff beyond it. A large boulder fell to pieces, leaving a cloud of dust.

"What? What was that sound?"

"It sounds like a hit… are they sniping at us?"

"Shit! That's why he told us to stop! He got us! Speed up. We *will* cut them off."

<You missed! They've begun to move.> Major Stork's voice filled Wil's ears. Wil replied immediately.

<I can see as well. Could we also start moving? I can't take aim like this.>

<But—>

<Quickly!>

Major Stork pulled out the cable connecting his radio to Wil's and ran from the dining car and into the hallway. Along the way, he nearly kicked Benedict before quickly leaping over and into the conductor's cabin. He grabbed the radio set and hollered at the engineers.

<Start this train now, or we all die!>

The transcontinental express began grinding to life at a maddeningly slow pace.

"What's going on?" Asked Benedict.

"They noticed our attack at the last second. That's why we've started moving as well."

"You mean we'll snipe them while we're moving? That's too rash!"

"Then do you have any other suggestions? The three of you, stay here! And Allison!" Major Stork cried sharply. Allison glared at his omission of a title.

"What?"

"You must stay put, do you understand? All we can do now is trust in Wilhelm." Said Major Stork, his eyes fixed on her. Allison grinned and shrugged.

"There's no need to worry about that. I always trust Wil."

After Major Stork opened the door and disappeared into the dining car again, Benedict suddenly took up the shotgun and stood.

"Where are you going?" Asked Fiona.

"I do not know if I can do it or if I cannot, but I will attempt to do a distraction strategy."

"What do you mean?"

Benedict pointed at his shotgun.

"With this, I will shoot the armored railcar. If I control the angles well, I will hit him—er, it. After all, they are slugs."

Allison cut in.

"Yeah, but it'll do about as much good as a peashooter."

"Yes. But their nerves will lean, not to Wil, but to this side."

"Of course…"

Benedict turned to Fiona.

"Then, I will shortly do dramatics. Please wait here."

“All right. Come back soon.” Fiona replied with a smile. Benedict slowly leaned forward and tilted his face toward hers.

Watching their quiet kiss, Allison silently grumbled to herself.

“Not fair.”

“Can you take aim?” Major Stork asked Wil as he returned to the dining car, re-connecting the radio.

“Not yet.” Wil replied quickly.

The anti-tank rifle was pointing as far to the left as possible, almost touching the left edge of the hole.

The more the train accelerated, the worse the noise and vibrations became. The image through the scope shook violently.

Wil finally spoke.

<Almost.>

<At this point, we have no choice but to shoot in motion. Have you ever fired a gun while moving?> Asked Major Stork.

<Just once.> Wil replied.

“The train’s begun to move, sir.”

“I see as well. Load the machine gun with ten armor-piercing shells. All personnel, prepare to open fire.”

“Are we really going to shoot the train, sir?”

“We’re just going to figure out where that shot came from, and drive about ten shells into that area. Make sure you do not disable any critical parts of the—what was that noise? There! Again!”

“They seem to be firing at us, sir. There’s no doubt. Is that a rifle? I hear bullets ricocheting off the railcar. They might as well be knocking with their fists.”

“But as long as we’re being attacked, we must retaliate. Where are the shots coming from?”

At the very first window of the first dining car.

Of all the windows, there was only one where the curtains were wide open.

“Take this!”

Benedict had lowered the window and was shooting in a half-squat position. Across the valley he could see the armored railcar, moving just ahead of the train.

“That should do it.”

He slightly raised the muzzle and pulled the trigger. There was the sound of gunfire, and the accompanying recoil. Benedict quickly pulled the fore grip to load the next round.

“Please let this one hit.”

He pulled the trigger again.

<Was that gunfire?>

<Ah, Major Carr is drawing fire for us.> Replied Major Stork, who had peered out of the window for a moment. Then, he turned his gaze to the armored railcar that was racing quite far ahead.

<Can you take aim?>

<Almost!>

“Again! Damn it! Where are the shots coming from?”

“First Lieutenant! I’ve found it. The second car from the back, near the front.”

“Let’s see… I see it. The muzzle’s sticking out of the window.”

“It must be a rifle after all.”

“Hah. It looks like someone’s playing the hero. Is the machine gun ready?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. We switch seats. I’ll shoot. I’ll blow him away, window and all. Slow down so we’re running at even pace.”

The turret of the railcar slowly began to turn left. The thin barrel, which had been bowing toward the lake, rose parallel to the ground. Then came the projectile.

A blast of smoke and flame escaped the muzzle.

The ten shells made direct contact with the barrel and the stock of the shotgun that was sticking out of the window, the window frame, and everything within a two-meter radius. Shards of glass sparkled in the sunlight, and the broken shotgun was blasted into the other side of the car. It ricocheted violently off the wall.

The shotgun fell to the thick carpet with a dull sound in the deserted dining car.

“Excellent. A direct hit.”

“Sir. We’ve found a good pace. We’ll be slowing down slightly.”

“I’m back.” Benedict said, sitting down next to Fiona.

“Welcome back. I heard some loud noises just now. What happened?” Fiona asked. Benedict looked unfazed as he answered.

“I tied the shotgun with a curtain beside the window, and put it outside a little. It must have been shot. Poor shotgun.”

<Now’s your chance. Fire.>

For the second time, Wil pulled the trigger.

Flames spouted from next to the turret of the railcar.

“Whoa! What was that?”

“We’ve been hit! It’s a large-caliber weapon, sir. They’re still alive!”

“Speed up. Figure out where they’re shooting from!”

<That’s a hit. Right next to their turret. Target is still moving.>

<Understood.>

Wil closed his left eye and stared at the railcar with his right eye on the scope. On the floor between the stands of the anti-tank rifle were two enormous shell casings.

<The train’s shaking too much.>

<You must remain calm. You can succeed. Wait for the vibration to abate, immediately after the moment when the wheel passes over the grooves in the rail.>

<And they keep speeding up. I keep messing up my aim…> Wil said anxiously. Major Stork replied, his voice calm.

<One of the events in the Kaashi shooting competition involves predicting the movements of a target, correct? Game 3, ‘The Rabbit Hunt’. It’s essentially the same thing. Remember the rabbit-shaped target moving along the rails. This time, your target is much larger.>

<…Yes. I think I could hit something like a rabbit.>

“Where… where are you hiding…?”

“Sir, I’ve found it! The last car!”

"…I see! Heh. They've even blown a hole through the wall… Shit. That's practically a cannon. Load every round we have."

"Ready to fire, sir."

"Good. Open fire. Kill them."

Before Wil could pull the trigger, the railcar's machine gun roared once more. The tracer shells, of which there were one in five, drew thin lines over the blue waters.

The rain of shells passed clear over the train's white roofs and hit the rocky mountains, whipping up clouds of dust.

"What? Damn it! That shot earlier killed the sights!"

Wil pulled the trigger.

The windows near the rifle, unable to take a third impact, simultaneously split.

The round flew over the water, surpassing the speed of sound. The multiple waves of impact created in its wake left intricate lines on the mirror-clean surface of the lake.

The round pierced, not a rabbit-shaped target, but the back of the armored railcar.

Passing between the loop of the caterpillar tracks, it easily shot through the metal plating and punctured the internal fuel tank. A tulip-shaped hole was left in the thin metal tank. The round bounced all throughout the interior like a rogue firework. The sparks created in the impact leapt into the murky depths of fuel.

The back of the railcar exploded. The railcar leaned forward for a moment, propelled by the red-hot flames.

The explosion created ripples on the water's surface, and by the time they crossed the lake and reached the train, the back of the railcar finally hit the ground, its wheels derailed from the tracks.

Black smoke spewed from the railcar as it left the tracks and began moving diagonally.

"Please don't let it fall into the water. Don't pollute the lake."

Perhaps Major Stork's plea had been heard—the railcar suddenly tilted to the right. The caterpillar tracks skidded over the ground to the right, and the horn-shaped buffers were caught in the crossties. With that as a fulcrum, the railcar tilted left again and began sliding down in a trail of sparks.

Eventually, it came to a stop on the tracks. In the windless valley, black smoke rose directly into the air.

The white roofs of the transcontinental express slowly made their way through to the other side of the valley.

"Wh-what's happening here? The railcar exploded."

“They must have shot it with the anti-tank rifle. It’s unbelievable.”

Terreur’s greasy face was pressed against the window. Ien’s face was as chilly as ever.

“Hah! So that’s the power of my rifle! Once it’s been supplied to the infantry, their potential will increase exponentially! The military police can go shoot themselves—I have no business with them!”

As Terreur triumphantly punched the air, Ien silently picked up his handgun from his chair.

“Master.”

Terreur turned and flinched at the sight of Ien’s gun.

“What?”

With the gun in hand, Ien shook his head several times.

“There’s something wrong… something is not right.”

“What do you mean? Speak up.”

“According to the plan, the train should have stopped next to the lake so that we could hand over the cargo.”

“But the military police was on our trail—”

“All we know about our contacts is that they were a group within the Sou Be-Il military. But if those MPs were members of that group…”

“Then what about the contact who joined us?”

“If he’s not the man we believed he was… then it all makes sense.”

Terreur flushed red with rage.

“You mean he deceived us?”

“I cannot say for certain yet, but it’s quite likely. I will investigate further. Master, you must remain inside with the door locked. Do not open the door for anyone. After all, now that the conductors are dead, I’m the only one with the key to this cabin.”

“I… I see. Then be off. But—”

“Yes, Master.”

“Do *not* die. I want you by my side when I recover my fortunes.”

“…Understood.”

With a courteous bow, Ien took his handgun, equipped with a stock, and left the room.

The door closed shut. The sound of the clicking lock filled the cabin.

<Excellent work. That was truly magnificent.> Said Major Stork, holding out a hand to Wil. Wil was lying on the carpet, having pushed himself away from the rifle. <How is your shoulder? Not dislocated, I hope?>

<It's fine, thank you. But… When I was pushed back by the recoil, my stomach got pulled over my belt buckle. That was very painful.>

<Hah hah. In any case, that was marvelous. You can take off the headgear now.>

By the time they both stood and took off their headgear, Benedict and the others had opened the dining car door and entered.

"You're all well, I see. I think Wilhelm here deserves a word of praise from each person. Ah, let's not forget Major Carr's excellent diversion."

Allison immediately approached Wil and stroked his sweaty face.

"You're soaked. You might end up with a rash if you don't wipe this soon."

"Don't worry. I'm not a kid, Allison." Wil chuckled, taking out a handkerchief from his pocket. He handed it to her. "Here. Wipe your hand."

Allison stared at the handkerchief in silence, before grabbing it and mercilessly wiping Wil's face.

"Take this."

"Whoa."

"Don't move—you might hurt yourself. Can't you at least let me do this much for you?"

As Major Stork watched them in silence, Benedict spoke from behind him.

"What will happen to them?"

"We'll have to take care of them somehow, eventually. But before that, I'm going to contact the engineers and go butter up the VIP. Please wait here, everyone." Major Stork said over his shoulder, opening the door and leaving the dining car.

* * *

"To stop Mr. Terreur's running and arrest him… that was Major Stork's true mission, you say?"

"That's what he told me."

"I understand. That man is from the capital Sfrestus, he said. Probably he is in the military's secret information department. Certainly he is not a normal soldier."

The four of them were sitting in pairs next to the dining car entrance. Benedict turned to Wil.

"When the military arrests Mr. Terreur and receives confessions, 'they' will be beaten in one shot. I'm sure that a large amount of people will be arrested from our military. This will be an incredible scandal that earthquakes the entire military. But that cannot be helped. Whatever, the military shrink cannot be avoided, and I am thinking to leave the military too."

"But how could he kill all those innocent crew members for something like that…?" Fiona trailed off, heartbroken.

"It is not an action that I can celebrate… but if he did not do that, over forty people would sacrifice—"

At that point, Benedict stopped himself.

"—No. I wil stop there. It is a terrible habit for soldiers to do maths with people's lives. Likely, Major Stork was worried that we would not help him if he told us that story, so he made it a secret."

Wil, who was drinking out of a water bottle Allison had handed him, suddenly spoke.

"But… there's something I don't really get."

"What?" Allison asked. Wil replied immediately.

"Why didn't he kill us? Allison and I witnessed him killing Mr. Welch, and thanks to that, the murders were discovered much earlier than they would have been if we hadn't. If he'd killed and silenced us, Mr. Terreur wouldn't have had to play along a fake story. Major Stork could have just pretended to discover the bodies and led the train to the supply base."

"Come to think of it… you're right." Allison mumbled, then suddenly nodded. "Wait. I've got it."

"Hm?"

Wil, Benedict, and Fiona turned to Allison in unison.

"The major must have fallen for me."

There was another moment of silence. The rhythmic sound of the wheels suddenly sounded much louder.

Wil stared at Allison, at a loss for words.

"C-come on, I was just joking."

At that moment, they heard a knock from the door connecting the hallway and the dining car.

Allison, who was sitting nearest the door, approached it and peered outside through the glass pane, but there was no one there.

"?"

What she saw the moment she opened the door was Ien, charging toward her.

"Eek!"

"Allison!"

Wil pulled her back from behind and pushed her aside. Immediately,

"Ugh!"

Ien's left shoulder drove itself into Wil's gut. It was a powerful blow. Wil struggled to remain on his feet, but he was thrown into the dining car as he landed on his back on the carpet.

"Wil!" Allison cried, twisting around. Ien's foot swung at her. Allison bowed to avoid the kick and ran to Wil, who was squirming in pain on the carpet.

"Shit!" Ien swore, pulling out his handgun. At that moment, a chair struck him hard in the chest. Benedict, who was across from him, had swung the chair with both hands.

The chair fell to pieces, and at the same time, Ien staggered and dropped his gun. The bullet fired in midair shot out the window. The shell casing, however, had not been properly ejected—the gun fell to the floor.

"Move away." Benedict grabbed Fiona by the hem of her clothes and leapt toward the wall.

"Damn you!"

Ien, having recovered from the blow to the chest, curled his hands into fists and swore. At that moment, Benedict lunged with a fist. It landed square on Ien's left cheek. There was a glint of fury in Ien's face, crooked toward the right.

"Huh?"

"Take this!"

With a battle cry, Ien shoved Benedict with his left hand. The attack, driven by all of Ien's weight, connected with Benedict's chest.

Snap.

"Urgh!"

With a nauseating noise, Benedict was flung past Fiona and into a window frame about three meters away. The curtain he grabbed by reflex tore, and he helplessly slid down the wall.

Benedict groaned in agony as he shot a furious glare at Ien. Ien glared back, blood spilling from his mouth.

"Those skills will get you nowhere on the battlefield, Hero of the Mural."

"I could beat those words right out of your mouth if we were in the air… you're pretty good for an old man."

"We are on land, Hero of the Mural. And here is a little payback."

With that, Ien grabbed a chair with one hand and lobbed it at Benedict. It hit Benedict's arms as he quickly braced himself, and fell to pieces. Benedict flinched visibly.

"Gah!"

Finally, he grasped the right side of his chest—the place Ien had hit earlier—and collapsed.

Ien took a look around the dining car. In the center of the car, Wil lay on his stomach. Next to him was Allison, desperately trying to shake him awake.

"Wil! Wil!"

Ahead of Ien, to his left, lay Benedict. And in front of the left wall—

"Ah."

There was the terrified Fiona.

"Hello there, your future Majesty." Ien said, eerily calm. Fiona fell to her knees and tried to back away. But her head quickly hit the wall behind her.

"It's not in me to kill a woman, but since you're past your prime, I'm sure you won't feel as upset about dying. Unfortunately, you will have to die. I can't allow a single person to survive."

He slowly began to walk toward Fiona.

"Fi… run…" Benedict gasped.

Fiona silently looked up at Ien as he drew near.

"Farewell, your future Majesty." Ien said, slowly crouching to the floor. His hands reached out toward Fiona's neck. But suddenly, a smile rose to her lips.

"?"

Ien's hands stopped.

"I think I'm more cut out for this than being a queen—" Fiona said with a grin. Her right hand, which had been at her side, passed under Ien's left arm and in front of her face. In her fingers was a long, thin, metal apparatus.

"Smile."

Fiona pressed the shutter.

There was a noise, followed by a blinding flash of light. A white flash overwhelmed Ien's face as he reflexively shut his eyes. For a single second, his face was illuminated to the

point that his features were impossible to distinguish. His shadow was cast on the opposite wall.

"Gah!"

Fiona quickly held up her camera and brought it down on Ien's forehead as he gasped with his eyes closed. She slipped away as he staggered, half-crawling to Benedict.

Meanwhile, Allison was still shaking Wil.

"Wil! Wil!"

"You're hurting me even more, Allison… please, stop…" Wil managed to whisper. "…Check… check my left side… quickly…"

"Hm?"

Allison flipped up Wil's jacket.

"Shit!" Ien cried, pushing himself against the wall and taking to his feet. His breathing was ragged as he shook his head several times.

"I let my guard down."

Ien blinked rapidly as he turned to Fiona, who was helping Benedict up. Though Benedict's face was racked with pain, he managed to sit up and lean against the wall.

"I'll kill you all!" Ien roared, but at that moment,

"Hands in the air!"

It was Allison.

"!"

Ien quickly turned round. Allison was in the center of the car, with one knee on the ground next to the fallen Wil. She had a gun—the revolver Benedict had lent to Wil—trained on Ien.

"If you so much as *twitch*, I'll shoot!"

Allison's hands were firmly wrapped around the gun, and her arms were stretched forward. There were about seven meters between her and Ien.

Benedict, who was leaning on the wall, and Fiona, who was supporting him, looked at Allison and Ien.

"Don't make me laugh…" Ien growled.

"Fine. Then I'll shoot. I *want* to shoot."

Without a moment's hesitation, Allison pulled the trigger. The magazine rotated and the hammer plunked down.

Bang.

There was a clear gunshot as the revolver leapt up with the recoil.

And.

For some time, Ien stood in confusion.

He looked down and examined his own body. He was unharmed. When he turned, he saw something shaped like a spiderweb on the little glass window on the entrance of the dining car.

"Young lady… your shooting skills are atrocious." Ien remarked.

"Shut up! I'm just not used to this gun, that's all! If I had mine, things would've ended two seconds ago!" Allison retorted. Then, her index finger—still hooked on the trigger—pressed down in the heat of the moment.

Bang.

The second shot uselessly left a hole in the floor between Allison and Ien. Allison herself was taken aback, but she quickly took aim again.

"Anyway, you'd better surrender!"

"Is this your idea of a joke? Am I supposed to be laughing?" Ien replied.

Benedict, who was watching from the side, struggled to speak.

"Not the head… go for the stomach…"

"Take this!"

Allison pulled the trigger.

Bang. Bang.

Two shots in a row. Ien quickly covered his face. The first shot broke a decorative plate hanging on the wall behind him. The second shot landed square on the right side of his chest.

"Urgh." Ien gasped. He was pushed back for a second, but he quickly recovered.

"I got him! …Huh?"

Ien only staggered; he refused to fall.

"What?"

Benedict's eyes widened.

"That hurt…" Ien growled. He put a hand to his chest and went over the spot where the bullet hit. There wasn't a drop of blood on his hand.

“That wasn’t too bad, young lady. It was quite painful.”

“What happened?” Allison gasped, still holding the gun. Ien tapped his own chest.

“Really, an excellent product. We’ll have to supply these to soldiers in the future.”

“Shit! He had a bulletproof vest!” Benedict swore. He ground his teeth. “Go for the head after all.”

“There!”

Bang.

The fifth shot. Ien once more covered his face. The bullet missed his side by forty centimeters.

“Do people never tell you that you really have no talent for shooting, young lady?”

“Shut up!”

“You have only one shot left.”

“I’m doing this on purpose!”

“Really, now? If you miss again, you’d best be prepared. I’ll slaughter you all and throw you into the lake.”

“Argh…”

Allison shot Ien a furious glare. The tip of the muzzle trembled. It was aimed squarely at his covered head, then it shook away and came back. The occasional shaking of the train only worsened her trembling.

“What’s wrong?” Ien taunted, taking a threatening step forward.

“You… damn it…”

A droplet of sweat fell down Allison’s forehead. At that moment,

“Calm down.”

With that, someone came up to Allison and embraced her from behind. A head of brown hair leaned right up to Allison’s blonde.

“Wil!”

As soon as she turned, Wil’s profile filled Allison’s vision. There was a thin stream of blood flowing down the left side of his forehead.

“Let me help. Stretch out your arm a little more. Put your right arm forward, and pull your left arm a little toward your body.” Wil advised, slowly placing his own hands over hers. He took hold of the gun with her. His placed his index finger over hers.

“It’s all right. One shot is more than enough.”

"This is a joke. Are you trying to make fun of me?" Ien spat, slightly opening his arms as Allison and Wil took aim together. Benedict spoke up.

"Lastly, there is one thing I want to tell. He is sixth place at the Kaashi shooting competition."

Ien silently turned his gaze back to Allison and Wil.

"Good. A little to the left… pull the trigger slowly, like you're pulling on the string of a kite. Don't be tense… wait for the moment when the wheels pass over a groove in the rails. Okay?"

"Yeah!" Allison replied, her face pressed up to Wil's.

A second later.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaargh!" Ien cried, charging at the two. Wil finally added,

"A little to the right. Yeah… shoot."

Bang.

There was a clean gunshot as the man's howl and charge were both forcibly stopped. After a moment of silence, he fell powerlessly to his knees.

"Ah… ah…?"

He twisted around as he collapsed to the floor. On his forehead was a small hole. Crimson blood ran down his head and pooled on the carpet. The ceiling was all that was reflected in his wide-open eyes.

"Shit… you… got… me…" Ien gasped. "If… I… die… what… of… the… master…?"

"Your master will be arrested for the sin of trying to smuggle weapons. Sou Be-Il does not execute people. He will be comfortable in jail all his life." Benedict answered, getting to his feet with Fiona's help as he kept a hand pressed over his chest.

"I… see… Ha!"

With that, the man's lips finally stopped moving. Benedict placed his fingers on his neck and looked down at his eyes.

"You were an excellent bodyguard."

Fiona gently reached out and closed Ien's eyes. And quietly, she whispered to the smiling corpse.

"May your soul find salvation in heaven."

"Wil, Allison, are you all right?"

"Yeah. Though Wil's a bit heavy…"

"Sorry. I just lost all my strength…"

When Benedict turned, he saw a powerless Wil barely being supported by Allison. Eventually, Wil slowly sat up with his own strength and plunked down next to her, sighing loudly.

"Wil, is your health all right?"

"Yes, more of less. Although I think I got the wind knocked out of me for a while… Ah! But what about you, Benedict?"

"Oh, about me? Whatever the case, I think I have a crack on my rib. It hurts. Well, I will not die." Benedict replied. Fiona gave him a worried look, but Benedict smiled. "And you were excellent. Thank you for rescuing us."

Allison pressed a wet handkerchief to Wil's forehead and looked at his face again and again. And she never once forgot to ask him if he really was all right.

"Don't worry. It's just a scratch." Wil replied.

"It seems that, earlier, he heard our talks. We were too rash." Benedict said. A second later.

"!"

Wil suddenly raised his head. The handkerchief on his forehead fell to the floor. His bleeding had stopped.

"It can't be…"

Wil stood and picked up the handgun Ien had dropped.

"What is wrong?"

"Where is Major Stork? Did Ien—"

Wil pulled the slide and ejected the stuck shell casing, loading the next round.

"I'll go have a look."

"Me too—"

"You stay here, Allison." Wil cut her off, disappearing out the door.

In the long hallway of the galley. Major Stork, who was standing at the door leading into the next coupling, noticed Wil running down the hallway.

"Hm? Wilhelm!"

Wil, who had been looking around, quickly spotted Major Stork and breathed a sigh of relief. He soon approached Major Stork, who noticed his bloodied forehead and the gun in his hand.

"Did something happen?!"

"Mr. Terreur's bodyguard overheard us talking… he tried to kill us all."

"And?!" Major Stork cried, sounding almost anxious. Wil replied calmly.

"I'm all right."

"Yes, I can see that! What of the others?"

"Allison…" Wil trailed off. Major Stork closed his eyes.

"…Allison shot him and saved us all. The others are injured, but we're all safe. But now you won't be able to get a confession out of him."

"That's… in any event, I am glad to hear that everyone is all right. And really, we can get all the confessions out of Mr. Terreur."

"Where were you, Major?"

"The radio in the conductor's cabin suddenly stopped working, so I had to walk all the way to the locomotive and back. I ordered them to continue to the foot of the mountains."

"I see. I was afraid that the bodyguard had killed you."

"Thank you for your concern. Now, all that's left is to settle things with Mr. Terreur himself. I could theoretically arrest him now, but it will do just as well to merely keep an eye on him until we reach the village. The VIP cabin's walls and doors are bulletproof—while on one hand, it is as safe as a bunker, it is also as secure as a prison."

Major Stork crossed the coupling and headed to the VIP car. Wil followed after him.

The door to the bodyguard lounge was unlocked. Major Stork entered and knocked on the VIP cabin door. There was no response.

"Mr. Terreur! It's me! Open up!"

Several times he loudly rapped on the heavy bulletproof door, but there was no response to be heard.

"It can't be…"

He pulled on the doorknob, but it would not budge.

"Ien must have the key. Could you go retrieve it for me?" Asked Major Stork. Wil nodded.

"Of course. Be careful."

Watching Wil quickly leave, Major Stork whispered to himself.

"Just naive enough. Don't ever become a villain like me."

“Here you are.”

Not long afterwards, Wil returned from the dining car and handed him the key. Allison, Fiona, and Benedict followed soon after. Benedict was supported by Fiona. Major Stork gave them a lighthearted smile.

“I’m glad to see everyone’s safe.”

“Thank you.” Replied Benedict, who looked the most weary of the group.

Allison looked up at Major Stork. Her long blond hair was stained with blood.

“We owe you one really eventful trip, Major. Remind me to never go traveling with you again.”

Major Stork gave a wry grin and knocked on the VIP cabin once more. He warned Terreur that he would be entering, and put the key into the lock.

There was a click as the door opened.

“How… how could this have happened?” Major Stork’s quiet voice filled the room.

The five people in the cabin were looking down on the corpse sitting on the sofa. There was blood flowing from its head. Under its limp right hand, a small gun had fallen.

“He must have determined and killed himself…” Benedict mumbled.

“Ien, your master is dead. Ask him yourself why that is so.”

Major Stork picked up the gun, removed the magazine and bullets, and placed them on the table. On the tabletop was the exquisitely-detailed key to the VIP cabin.

After entering the VIP cabin, Wil had done nothing but silently stare at Terreur’s corpse.

“There is no death penalty in Sou Be-Il. Even if he were to stand trial, he would have escaped with his life. It looks like all that hard work was for nothing. My mission is a failure.” Major Stork sighed bitterly, a hollow laugh escaping his lips. “How irritating. I thought I had deceived Mr. Terreur to the end, but he had the last laugh after all. If there was such a thing as a goddess of fortune…”

“If there was?” Allison asked. Major Stork replied,

“She must be a cruel and fickle mistress indeed.”

Chapter 9: The Answer is Allison

By the time the bullet-ridden transcontinental carrying the corpses of Terreur and Ien crossed fully over the Iltoa Mountain Range and arrived at the hill country at the foot of the mountains, Wil and the others were fast asleep.

At the back of the first dining car, where the damage was least severe, the four of then had laid out sheets and mattresses from the crew's sleeping car and fallen asleep in a row. Next to them was a basket of bread that they had emptied out for lunch and dinner, and bottles of jam and water.

"We've arrived."

Major Stork woke up three people. Allison alone was woken by Wil.

They were in a large train garage. The train was inside a long, narrow building. On the adjacent tracks was the steam locomotive, what had been taken apart for maintenance. It was dark outside. Lamps cast dull light from the ceiling, where steel frames were clearly visible.

"I'm terribly sorry for bringing you to a place like this. It would have been much too conspicuous if we were to pull into a station in this state, so I had the train brought to a military facility. My friends will take care of the rest. The four of you will be taken to a hotel by car. We are currently in a village at the foot of the western side of the Iltoa Mountain Range. It is a beautiful place with a rich history and tradition."

After his explanation, Major Stork added,

"The village is called 'Lillianne'."

The four of them said goodbye to Major Stork, who remained on the scene, and were driven through the night by a man in a black suit, who was their guide. The car carrying their luggage followed.

Soon, the car arrived at the basement parking lot of a luxurious hotel in the center of town.

The four of them took an elevator and were led into rooms on the top floor of the building. They were assigned two rooms—one booked for Benedict and Wil, and the other booked for Allison and Fiona.

Allison was furious at the guide, but the guide—though taken aback—explained that he had only followed Major Stork's orders.

"Let's do what he says, Allison. Benedict's hurt, and we all just want to get some sleep today." Wil said, calming Allison. She shot him a glare, but eventually surrendered and followed Fiona into their room.

Soon after Benedict and Wil went to their luxurious room, a doctor visited them. Without a single prying question or attempt at idle chatter, he examined them both. He gave

painkillers to Benedict, whose rib was cracked, and put disinfectant on Wil's forehead before leaving.

Finally, Benedict and Wil were alone.

"I happen to be glad I'm not in the same room as Allison." Wil said suddenly. Benedict, who was lying on his bed, looked at him.

"I have something very complicated to discuss."

"That's… unbelievable, Wil. But it's not impossible."

"I don't want to let things end this way. Isn't there something we can do? This is Sou Be-Il. You're the only person I can count on."

Benedict was silent.

"Please."

"Hm… I might be able to work something out. I was planning to do it anyway. And as long as I can secure a good place tomorrow morning… but it's still a dangerous plan. You know that, right?"

"I'm the only one who's going to be in danger. And this is my first and last chance. If I don't do this, everyone will walk away believing in a lie."

Benedict was silent.

"Please."

"…All right. I'll take part in your plan."

"Both Wil and that major! What are they thinking?!"

"Please, calm down, Allison."

"This is outrageous! Stupid!"

"Please, Allison. There's still another day left."

"If things end like this, my plan's going to be a total failure!"

"We'll have to try and make sure that doesn't happen."

"You're right! But I'm just going to get some sleep tonight. This room looks expensive."

* * *

The next morning.

"Let's see. 'The village of Lillianne was a royal vacation spot for the Royal Family of Iltoa in the Middle Ages, and first started with a single country house built by the lake. The name of the village comes from the daughter of the king of that time, who went on to become the wise and beloved Queen Lillianne'. And… 'The brick buildings were the first to be placed under the protection of the Historic Architecture Protection Law after the rapid industrialization brought on by the industrial revolution. The clean waters flowing down from the Iltoa Mountain Range created fertile conditions for the land, and many locals harvest flowers from the outskirts of the village to use for perfumes. In early summer, the flowers come into full bloom all over the village, giving it the nickname of 'Flower Town'."

"It really is a beautiful town. It's funny to think that we could only be here because of what happened yesterday… oh no!"

"What's wrong?"

"I left my camera in my room… both cameras. What was I thinking?"

The car was moving down a road lined with brick buildings. Allison, Fiona, Wil, and Benedict were inside an expensive limousine. The driver was a man wearing a black suit and sunglasses. Because cars drove on the left side of the street in Sou Be-Il, the driver's seat was on the right.

In the large back seats, separated by a pane of glass, were four large seats placed facing one another. On one seat was Allison, who was translating and reading out a tourists' guide from the hotel into Roxchean, and Fiona, who had forgotten her cameras. Across from them were Wil and Benedict.

Allison was dressed much like the previous day, though her sweater was replaced by a leather jacket. She also had a small canvas bag placed gently on her lap. Fiona was wearing a long skirt and a white blouse, along with a cardigan. Wil, like the previous day, was in his school uniform with a new shirt. He was holding something that looked like a briefcase.

And as for Benedict—

"What is that outfit, Benedict?"

He was in uniform.

Benedict was dressed impeccably in a black Air Force uniform. His badge of rank was on his collar, and his medals shone proudly over his chest. Around his waist were his belt and holster. A large Air Force hat was on his lap. He stuck out like a sore thumb among his friends.

"Well, this is my formalwear…" Benedict replied. Fiona looked confused.

"So, where are we going?" Asked Allison.

"A beautiful place."

"Like?"

"I can't say yet…" Benedict trailed off. Allison and Fiona tilted their heads.

Wil was quietly watching the scenery outside. Brick houses passed by the windows.

The car left the village and drove along a hilly area covered in brown earth. They finally came to a stop at a park by a small lake. A dense layer of trees surrounded the water, and the sound of chirping birds accompanied the pleasant spring breeze.

There stood a lone stone building. Through the large arched entrance and its open doors, the first things that came into view were benches lined up on either side and an altar at the very front. In front of the white sculptures shaped like goddesses and angels were candle holders of gold and silver.

"It's beautiful." Fiona gasped, looking around. Soon, Benedict followed after her as he fixed his hat. Wil and Allison joined them.

"It is relieving that you are happy. It is a park that is also a chapel, which are common in this area. There are festivals and music parties here sometimes, as well. In the summer, it is even more beautiful because there are many, many flowers."

"It's beautiful now, too. It's a kind of beauty you don't really see in the mountains."

"There is no one here today, this place is a place where many people come during a holiday. I was born in a family that is not very faithful, so I only come here for things like this, but…" Benedict trailed off.

"Things like what?" Fiona quickly asked. Benedict put a hand to the brim of his hat and hid his face.

"That is… you will know soon."

Benedict went back to the limousine and asked the driver to wait in the car.

That was when another car arrived. Driven by another man in sunglasses, it was an expensive vehicle—and from it emerged a bespectacled, middle-aged soldier. Major Stork. Like the day he boarded the train, he was dressed in a dark brown Royal Army uniform. He was not carrying a suitcase.

"Good day, everyone. Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, thanks to you! So what are you doing here?" Allison asked sarcastically.

"Me? I was invited by Major Carr."

"Huh." Allison grumbled, shrugging.

"There are some things I'd like to report to you first, if that's all right by Major Carr." Major Stork said. Benedict gave him permission, and Stork began to explain.

Gauthier Terreur and Thomas Ien, who planned to smuggle weapons into Sou Be-Il and go into hiding, caused the murders in the train to speed up the journey, but they were abandoned by the accomplice who noticed the investigation and killed themselves. Their bodies would be taken into Roxchean custody. That was the information that would be reported to the public.

The passengers who remained at the supply base were all safe, but the trip was cancelled and they returned to Roxche via a train that had been dispatched from the East. The Hero,

who remained on the train with Terreur, and the people who remained to interpret were all safe, the report would also say.

“The deaths of the conductors and cabin crew will be reported as the actions of Ien alone.”

Major Stork’s tone was exceedingly mechanical. Wil interpreted for him, sounding equally unemotional.

Fiona, who had been silently staring at Major Stork, met his eyes for a moment. But she said nothing. Major Stork continued.

“On the Sou Be-Il side, we are continuing our internal investigation into the units and officers involved. That is all I can say about this incident. I’m sure that the right punishments will be handed out soon, out of the public’s sight. And for your information, in this particular case, I do not exist.”

“I have no intention of prying any further about that.” Benedict said quietly. “After all, Major Stork of the Royal Army does not exist on this continent. Just like Mr. Herman. And so the truth is lost, they say.”

“Of course.” Major Stork nodded. “Finally, everyone—although I suppose Major Carr Benedict of the Royal Air Force, who is a citizen of Sou Be-Il, does not count—all citizens of Roxche must return to the East within two days. I’ve arranged for an aeroplane to take you to Green Island tomorrow morning.”

“So we don’t get to see the capital after all.”

“That’s a shame. Although I suppose we can’t do much about it.”

Allison and Wil sighed.

“I’m terribly sorry about this. But I will find a way to invite you back to our nation—to the capital, Sfrestus. I can’t say when, but please let me one day give you a final token of my gratitude. I am truly thankful for your courage and heroic actions. That is all for my report.”

“Shall we?” Asked Benedict. Fiona asked if they would be looking inside the chapel.

“Of course. That is why we came here. That is also why I called Major Stork to come here.”

“It is an honor.” Major Stork chimed in.

“What do you mean?” Asked Allison.

“Hm? Haven’t you heard—”

“Everyone! Inside, please!” Benedict cried, cutting off Major Stork.

“What’s going on?”

Gently pushing the confused Fiona inside, Benedict entered the chapel. Allison and Wil followed them. Major Stork instructed his driver to remain on standby, and joined the others.

A betrothal oath.

It was a ceremony observed by nearly all couples in Sou Be-Il. Two people who decided to marry would visit a chapel or a church and seal their betrothal with a kiss. Although it was perfectly fine for a couple to go alone, some invited friends and family to serve as witnesses.

"I want to ask to receive your permission to go through this ceremony together with you."

Benedict's explanation was so long-winded that it took a little time for Fiona to understand.

"Saying that, I wish to formalize—er, formally propose to you. That is why I carried you here. Do you understand me, Fi?"

Fiona, who finally comprehended the situation, looked up at Benedict's embarrassed, sweaty face.

"Truthfully, I wished to formally propose to you when the train went to Sfrestus, but things happened like this… I'm sorry. And I would like you to answer."

"What should I do?" Fiona asked. Benedict's response was simple.

"If 'yes', please kiss me. If 'no', please kick me."

Fiona closed her eyes and quietly raised her face.

Benedict slowly leaned down. His face drew near to hers.

"May the divine protection of the God of Love be upon us forevermore."

He said in Bezelese, then, in Roxchean—

"It is very great that the God of Love watches us, so please let him always."

They kissed before the altar.

Wil and Allison stood side-by-side at the bench to the right. Wil was watching them quietly, his briefcase under his left arm. Allison put a hand on his shoulder and whispered in awe.

"Wow."

To the left stood Major Stork. He took off his hat and held it before his chest as he watched two people with a gentle smile on his face.

Two people parted lips and opened their mouths in unison.

"Er."

"I—"

“Please, speak first.” Benedict said, yielding. Fiona chuckled. Tears fell from her eyes from the laugh, but she did not seem to care.

“It might be difficult to convince the villagers.”

“I will do my best.” Benedict replied.

“Thank you. It’s your turn.”

“What I want to say is that there might be many hard things in front of us, but we two should win together. Something that common. And…”

“And?”

“I will study Roxchean more.”

“Oh? You don’t have to.”

“Why?”

At Benedict’s question, Fiona laughed—even through the tears in her eyes—and answered.

“Because I love endlessly listening to your awful Roxchean.”

“Congratulations. It is an honor to have been invited.” Major Stork said to Benedict. Benedict also expressed his gratitude.

Allison, whose hand was gripping Wil’s jacket, finally let go and turned to the expressionless Wil.

“What do you think?”

“Hm? About what?”

“About the ceremony? Like, were you moved, or do you feel happy for them, or…”

“Oh, right… yeah. I do.”

“What kind of an answer is that?”

Wil half-ignored Allison’s rage and looked at Major Stork.

Major Stork walked up to Benedict and Fiona.

“Again, thank you for inviting me. Although I suppose you won’t be announcing this for a while yet, I’d like to express my hope that the two of you will become a new bridge connecting East and West. Well, if you’ll excuse me.”

With that, Major Stork bowed courteously.

“Thank you.” Said Fiona. “And I hope your duties are lessened from now on.”

For some reason, Benedict did not interpret her words into Bezelese. Major Stork raised his head and turned round at Wil and Allison, his blue eyes narrowing.

"And the two of you—be well. I doubt we'll ever meet again. The past two days must have been awful for you, but it was a fun time for me. Truly."

Wil did not answer. Allison lightly waved.

"Goodbye, Mr. Weirdo Major."

"Thank you. Excuse me."

Major Stork stood upright with a smile. He began walking down the aisle toward the exit.

Watching him leave, Wil whispered under his breath.

"'The departing knight'… or not?"

Allison turned to Wil, confused. Wil noticed her gaze and replied.

"Allison, just stay put and watch."

"…? Watch what?"

Wil ignored her and walked up to the altar.

"This way."

Benedict took Fiona's hand and stepped over to the side.

From before the altar, Wil looked straight ahead at the departing Major Stork.

Then, he slowly reached into the briefcase he had under his left arm. Soon, the clasp came undone and his right hand emerged.

In his grip was a handgun. It was large, with a thin wooden grip and a magazine equipped in front of it. The chassis was complex and the barrel thin.

Wil cocked the gun and disarmed the safety. He placed his left hand over his right and slowly raised the gun. The briefcase fell to the ground.

"Soon, I'll know the answer. Did I find the truth, or not? I'll be using the gun you lent me, Ms. Travas." Wil muttered to himself.

The gun was trained directly at the man's back. Wil's index finger touched the trigger.

"Now."

He pulled the trigger.

Bang.

A quiet gunshot echoed through the chapel.

The gun did not recoil very much. No shell casing was ejected.

"Ow!"

The bullet hit Major Stork on his right shoulder as he walked toward the entrance, then bounced off him and fell to the floor. It rolled under a bench and disappeared. It was a training round made of hard rubber.

Major Stork turned and stared at Wil, whose aim was still trained on him.

"That hurt."

"It certainly must have."

They spoke, making full eye contact.

Allison looked very confused. Fiona's jaw had dropped in shock. Benedict was gravely watching Wil and Benedict, who were standing on the aisle.

The doors behind Major Stork opened, and the two drivers rushed inside. They were both carrying the same military-issue automatic handguns as Stork. Silencers were equipped on the jutting barrels.

"So they weren't enemies after all." Benedict mumbled under his breath.

"Colonel!" One man cried, charging at Wil and taking aim. "Damn you!"

"Do not shoot." Major Stork ordered tersely.

The men in sunglasses immediately froze. Allison also stopped in the midst of reaching into the bag around her waist.

"But—"

"There is nothing to be upset about here. Both of you, please wait in the cars. And make sure no one enters this chapel. That is an order."

The men did not retort. They holstered their guns, glared at Wil—who was still aiming at Major Stork—and obediently returned to their cars.

The doors closed, and the men left their presence.

"'Colonel'. So you were ranked higher than you claimed, 'Major Stork'." Wil commented, finally lowering his gun. He could not sound any more indifferent.

"That's a Sou Be-Il gun. And an excellent model, at that. Might I ask how you came by it?"

"I'll explain later."

"Thank you. Now, Wilhelm. If memory serves, were you not the one who told me that we must not point a gun at someone without good reason?"

"Yes. And I'm sorry. Did it hurt?"

"Very much. I believe you'll at least explain?"

"Yes. There's something I'd like to tell you."

"I'm all ears."

"Thank you."

"Several things have been bothering me."

Standing with a gun in his right hand was Wil. Directly ahead of him, on the aisle, was Major Stork. To Wil's left, at the very front row of the benches, was Allison. On the other side were Fiona and Benedict. The four people remained where they were as they listened to what Wil had to say. Benedict struggled to interpret his words for Fiona.

"First is the matter of Mr. Terreur's suicide. Mr. Ien only learned of your identity after overhearing us speaking in the dining room. But how could Mr. Terreur have known, when he had locked himself in the VIP cabin all along? Isn't suicide much too rash a decision? Of course, without any decisive evidence, I can't do much more than ask these questions. Maybe Mr. Terreur's suicide really was just a rash choice on his part."

"I see. Is that all?" Asked Major Stork, gently rubbing his right shoulder.

"No. My second point is about you. You knew much too well about the attack patterns of the people you called 'them'. You somehow knew that they would attack from behind when we reached a deserted stretch of the mountains, and that they would try and drop the train into the valley to make it look like an accident. And you even managed to pick out exactly the things we needed from Mr. Terreur's unmarked crates. For someone who claimed that he needed more time before he could arrest 'them', you were too knowledgeable."

Wil paused there. Major Stork gave him as look as though waiting for more. Wil continued.

"In addition to that, there's the method you used to thwart 'their' plans—that is, killing the conductors and cabin crew to speed up the train and taking everyone to the supply base to split the train. It seems to me much too risky and improvised. What if someone had ended up witnessing a murder, and caused a commotion? In fact, that's exactly what happened in the end, with Allison and myself. Your actions did not look as though they followed a carefully prepared plan. If your goal really was to arrest Mr. Terreur before he fell into 'their' hands, you could have sent someone to do just that covertly before we left the buffer zone and entered the mountain range. Then 'they' would end up assaulting a train that does not carry their target, wasting their time. Of course, they would still cause the incident to cover up evidence, but in that case, all you have to do is report that Mr. Terreur was arrested in the lowlands while on the run alongside 'them'. Wouldn't that be a surer method?"

"That would mean the deaths of over forty people." Major Stork said reproachfully. Wil agreed and continued.

"Then let's change perspectives."

"What?"

"Here's an assumption. What if, Major Stork, your boarding the train was not for the purpose of arresting Mr. Terreur?"

"…Then why do you suppose I boarded?"

"To kill him with absolute certainty."

"Let me continue with this assumption as a basis. I thought about Mr. Terreur's death. What were the pros and cons of his being murdered on the train? First, the cons. The biggest problem it causes is that you can no longer force a confession out of him. In other words, you cannot arrest the people who cooperated with Mr. Terreur."

"And thanks to that, I'm in quite a bit of hot water."

"And the pros—one is that you can no longer force a confession out of Mr. Terreur and arrest the people who cooperated with him."

Major Stork was silent.

"If Mr. Terreur dies, those behind the execution of this incident and the people behind them will not be arrested. The 'scandal that shakes the entire military' that Benedict talked about will never happen. If stopping an earth-shaking scandal that may destabilize the currently peaceful state of affairs is more important than punishing those who moved to protect Mr. Terreur, this is incredibly beneficial. And there's more."

Wil paused and waited for Benedict to finish interpreting for Fiona. Once Benedict stopped,

"Should I take over?" Allison offered.

"No. You listen carefully to what Wil has to say, Allison."

"Really?" Allison mumbled, and tilted her head. Wil took his eyes off her and turned back to Major Stork.

"The other benefit is that the smuggling Mr. Terreur partook in with the Sou Be-Il military until now can be concealed forever. Even before this incident, Mr. Terreur had some connections to the Sou Be-Il military. Undoubtedly he must have been selling weapons and military intel. There must be quite a few people in the Sou Be-Il military connected to him—in other words, people who used him. If 'they' had gotten their hands on Mr. Terreur, they might have cooperated with the people I just mentioned and demanded that they assist in attacking Roxche. But with Mr. Terreur's death, the evidence is no more. Even if you arrested Mr. Terreur, there is no death penalty in Sou Be-Il. You would have had no choice but to keep him alive. Then he would spill anything he can think of to keep himself safe."

"Please, wait a moment. You mean to say that Mr. Terreur had connections to our military since before the end of the war?" Asked Major Stork. Wil's answer was immediate.

"Yes."

"Well… I believe I explained otherwise before you fired the anti-tank rifle. This was the first time Mr. Terreur acted to betray his own country."

Wil shook his head.

"That was a lie. I'm certain of it. I asked you on purpose because I was curious to hear what you would say. It was a trap of sorts."

"…And you have proof that convinces you of that?"

"Not here, no. But I have it in my head. Concrete evidence."

"Oh?" Major Stork said, amused. Wil paused before diving into one long sentence.

"I've once illegally entered Sou Be-Il by flying over the Lutoni River on Mr. Terreur's aeroplane, which was at Mr. Terreur's secret airstrip near the eastern border of the Republic of Raputoa. It was very simple."

"What…?"

Major Stork's expression faltered for the first time. The moment his eyebrows furrowed, Allison piped up.

"Oh, right! For your information, I did the piloting."

Major Stork turned to Allison.

"I see. It makes sense now."

Then, to Benedict. Benedict spoke.

"There aren't many civilians in that area, on both sides of the river. It must have been rather easy to smuggle things across if he used an aeroplane in the middle of the night. And to add, I also brought these two back to Roxche with incredible ease."

"Thanks for that, by the way. I had no idea it would be so easy to cross the Lutoni." Allison added.

"What… what are you talking about?" Asked Major Stork. Wil responded.

"We're talking about the method Mr. Terreur used to smuggle things over the border. As I said earlier, we once stole one of Mr. Terreur's aeroplanes. I'm sure you knew about the smugglings as well, Major. But you lied because that was a truth that must not be revealed, correct?"

Major Stork did not answer. But his silence was as good as acknowledgement.

"Let's continue with the assumption. If your goal was Mr. Terreur's death, and your mission was to kill him, what were your options? And if you had to make it look like an accident to make it easier to cover up? You just have to *cause* an accident. An 'unfortunate derailment', for instance." Wil said, using Major Stork's words. "I have more questions about you. Mr. Terreur and his bodyguard didn't seem very suspicious of you. That bothered me greatly. Mr. Terreur was going on the run. If the military were to assign him an officer for the purpose of 'security detail', it would only be natural for him to be displeased. But he easily accepted your idea of splitting the train to quickly head for the foot of the mountains. You said that that was to make it easier for the train to escape 'their' clutches, correct? But considering the relationship between Mr. Terreur and 'them', it's a rather strange stance for him to have taken. But things change if we assume that you were one of 'them' all along. You were a

member of the group assisting Mr. Terreur's flight—is what he believed, at the very least. He thought you were one of the facilitators of the scheme. Even when you split the train, all you had to tell him was that there was a change of plans. Mr. Terreur had no way of confirming your claims, and he wouldn't oppose you, either."

"…"

"And that must have been at least a half-truth. You did not board the train to thwart 'their' plans. You had made contact with 'them', pretended to sympathize with their cause, and joined their plot. That's when the military contact known as 'Major Stork' was created. His role was to take over the train before the attack and assist 'them'. That explains how you knew about Mr. Terreur's cargo, and how you knew so much about the way 'they' would try to attack."

Major Stork was silent.

"However, the goals you and 'they' had in mind were completely different. Your true mission was to kill Mr. Terreur and thwart their plans. That way, they would be discouraged from ever thinking to do such a thing again. At the same time, you silenced Mr. Terreur and prevented a scandal from getting out, effectively preventing the people from distrusting the military, and preventing a blow to military morale. It also neatly erases the fact that Sou Be-Il had been dealing with Mr. Terreur since before the war ended."

"…"

"Here's yet another assumption. What were you planning to do in order to achieve that goal? This is my hypothesis. You originally had no intention of killing the conductors and crew—the people in charge of the trip—to create a commotion and do something so risky and time-consuming as splitting the train at the supply base. You had no need to do so, and it was, in fact, better that you didn't. All you had to do, really, was ride the train and kill Mr. Terreur at your leisure, then kill the engineers or set up explosives to derail the train. In other words, you just had to cause an accident before 'they' attacked. One or two missing corpses wouldn't be a big deal in a train accident. But the missing corpse wouldn't be Mr. Terreur's—it would be yours. The man called Major Stork would die in the accident and disappear from 'their' sight forever."

"In other words, I was planning to kill all the innocent passengers on that train for the sake of this supposed mission?" Asked Major Stork.

"Yes." Wil answered firmly.

"A horrifying thought."

"Yes. But as 'they' thought, this is the simplest plan, and the easiest to cover up. The phrase 'unfortunate accident' can cover everything."

"Of course."

"But you did not choose that option. You split the train to try and outrun the attack, and you fought off an unexpected assault. And finally, you killed Mr. Terreur while disguising it as a suicide. I'm sure you were planning to kill Mr. Ien as well, in one way or another."

"Your hypothesis leaves one question, I'm afraid. How in the world did I kill Mr. Terreur?"

“The door to the VIP cabin was sturdy and locked. You were the only person who could have entered.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. Ien and Mr. Terreur were the only ones who had the keys.”

“Yes. Mr. Ien had his key on his belt, and Mr. Terreur’s was on his table. That’s how you set up a scene that implied that you could not have killed him. But the answer is simple. You also had a key. The VIP cabin key that the conductor was holding.”

“…”

“That was why you took the trouble of throwing Mr. Welch’s body off the train. To hide the fact that his bundle of keys had gone missing. Of course, you took care to keep your hands off anyone else’s possessions. You wanted to emphasize that the murderer was not after their valuables.” Wil declared. He stopped for a moment, perhaps to try and read Major Stork’s reaction. The man, however, silently waited for Wil to continue.

“This is all just my conjecture. But if it’s true, why did you go through the trouble to do something so risky? I thought about it, and concluded that it was because of sudden, unforeseen circumstances. What could it be, then?” Wil asked, and turned to the girl with blond hair and blue eyes.

“Hm? What?” Allison asked, amused. Wil did not reply, instead turned to Major Stork.

“Man.” Allison grumbled. As Major Stork watched, a faint smile rose to his face. Wil looked at him and finally spoke.

“The answer I found was ‘Allison’.”

Major Stork quietly stared at Wil.

Allison turned to Wil, confused.

“What? What about me?”

This time, he gave her an answer.

“I’m saying that you might be the reason why Major Stork suddenly did something so risky and unplanned.”

“Huh? What do you mean? Why would he?”

“I’ll explain, so listen carefully.”

“All right. I will.” Allison nodded.

Wil looked at Benedict and Fiona. Benedict gave him a silent nod. Wil turned back to Major Stork.

“You too, Major.”

“Please, tell me.” Major Stork replied softly but tersely.

"This has been bothering me all this time. I spoke to Allison and Benedict about it on the way, but I still didn't understand. Why didn't you kill Allison?"

"…"

"You spared her. I'm talking about early yesterday morning, when she witnessed you murdering Mr. Welch. You had the chance to erase evidence by killing me and Allison then and there. But doesn't it strike you as odd that a killer wouldn't kill the witnesses? We were in the observation car at the time, and no one had seen us there. All you had to do was drop Allison from the roof when she went after you, and kill me in the same way afterwards. It would have been so simple. And it would have been easy to make it seem like an accident —we could have easily fallen from the observation car."

Then, Wil paused. Major Stork said nothing.

"Why didn't you kill us? Because you didn't want to. Then why not?"

"Because he fell for me?" Allison made the same joke as the previous day.

"Sorry, Allison. Could you stay quiet for a bit?" Wil asked immediately. Allison shot him a furious glare. But she quickly waved lightly.

"All right. Keep going. I'm curious too."

"I considered many possibilities, but there's only one reason I could think of that was enough for you to spare Allison—even though you were heartless enough to kill innocent people for the sake of your mission. It's because you knew Allison. You've met her in the past, haven't you?"

"Ah!"

Fiona, who was listening through Benedict, cried out in a moment of epiphany. She froze with her mouth agape. Benedict looked at her, confused.

Major Stork maintained his silence.

"What? I've met this major before, Wil?" Asked Allison. Wil replied, his eyes never once leaving Major Stork.

"Yeah. That's right."

Allison blankly fell into thought.

"Hmm… Sorry, but I just don't remember. Was it at the joint training session at the end of last year? He's not the captain with glasses who showed us around, right? Or maybe… did we meet him when we crossed the Lutoni last year?"

"Earlier, Allison."

"There weren't any joint training sessions before that."

"I know. It was before that."

"But I couldn't have met someone from Sou Be-Il before that. Other than Grandma."

As Allison floundered in confusion, Wil gestured lightly.

“What is it?”

Allison made her way over to Wil, who stood in the aisle.

“What is it?”

“Look at him carefully, Allison. You just might remember.” Wil said, pointing at Major Stork.

Allison shook her head.

“I’ve seen him a lot over the past two days, but I don’t think I know him, Wil.”

“Really…? Then again, it’s been years now. And you wrote to me saying that you forgot his face, too. And there aren’t any photos of him left… I guess it’s not surprising.”

Allison, who had forced herself to listen all the way through Wil’s mumblings, shook her hands.

“Man, I don’t know! I give up! I surrender! Who is he? Did I meet him at the Future House? Was he our teacher at school? No, wait. Someone like that wouldn’t be in Sou Be-Il.”

Fiona was pale. She tightly grabbed Benedict’s arm.

“It’s all right. Leave it to Wil.” Benedict whispered. Fiona looked up at him.

“Will it really be okay?”

“Yes. It will.” Benedict replied quietly.

“So what’s the answer? C’mon, Wil. I said I surrender.”

“All right.” Wil nodded, and continued. “It might be hard to hear, but please brace yourself, Allison. Remember how you came as fast as you could, but Grandma had already passed away? Just like back then.”

Allison frowned and looked Wil in the eye. And she took a breath as though about to ask something. But,

“…All right.”

That was all she said.

“Let me tell you, then. Major Stork is—”

Wil opened his mouth, turning to Major Stork. The latter refused to looks away, standing tall as he waited for Wil.

“—the subordinate who killed your father on Green Island and fled to Sou Be-Il.”

“What?” Allison gasped.

“There’s just no other explanation.” Wil replied. Allison’s face turned blank, as though she had just woken up. And several seconds later,

“Oh. I see…”

Solemnly, she took out a revolver from the bag around her waist.

“So that’s it…”

Firmly holding the gun in both hands, she pointed it at Major Stork. Her aim was almost frighteningly accurate.

“Thanks for telling me something so important.”

As she slowly hooked her finger onto the trigger,

“Huh…? What?”

Wil’s left hand firmly grasped the top of the gun. Revolvers had the weakness of being unable to fire if the cylinder was held in place.

“It’s too early to be pulling the trigger, Allison.” Wil advised.

“Really?” Allison asked. She looked as calm as ever. Major Stork, facing down the muzzle, was also just as calm.

“Where did you get the gun?” Asked Major Stork.

“It’s mine.” Benedict responded in Wil’s place. Allison chimed in.

“Wil gave it to me before we left the hotel. In case we got into a dangerous situation, he said.”

Major Stork turned to Wil and muttered under his breath.

“…A villain…”

“Don’t shoot!” Fiona cried. “Don’t shoot him, Allison! I know how you feel! But you can just ask Wil to hit him! That’s enough, isn’t it?”

Allison turned and looked at Fiona. Fiona met her gaze, her eyes filled with quiet determination.

“Let me get a hit in, too.”

Allison smiled.

“If Wil tells me to shoot, I will.”

She turned back to Major Stork.

“Benedict! You have to stop her!” Fiona pleaded. But Benedict shook his head.

“No, I cannot.”

“Why?!”

“Because Wil’s magic is not finished.” Benedict replied.

With his grip still on the cylinder, Wil spoke again.

“You knew too much about Roxche, Major Stork.”

“Ah!”

Fiona looked up in surprise. She could understand him—Wil was speaking in Roxchean.

“Do you remember? When we were shooting at the armored railcar with the anti-tank rifle. Just before we fired the third shot, I was worried about the shaking of the train.”

Major Stork did not answer. He instead silently listened to Wil speaking in Roxchean.

“At that moment, you gave me the example of game 3 of the Kaashi shooting competition. It was the perfect piece of advice. Thank you. And another instance—Allison had spotted the locomotive coming up behind us, but she and I were speaking in Roxchean. You suddenly interrupted very loudly, demanding to know what we were saying. Almost like you understood what we were saying. That’s how you realized that we were being chased. You had no choice but to force yourself into the conversation.”

Major Stork said nothing.

“Perhaps you were chosen as the contact for this mission because you spoke Roxchean. Mr. Terreur and Mr. Ien seemed to have no idea. I’m sure that was very useful for you, as you could listen in on secret conversations without being suspected of a thing.”

“…”

“I don’t know if it was on Lestki Island or on the train, but the moment you saw Allison, you must have been flabbergasted. And you must have desperately begun to think. How could you safely assassinate Mr. Terreur, shake off the pursuers, and protect Allison from harm? And you solved all these problems.”

“…”

“I’m very thankful to you. I’m extremely grateful. If not for you, I would have been caught up in some petty conspiracy and killed. Me, Benedict, Fiona, and most importantly, Allison.”

“…”

“And there’s more I have to thank you about. Thank you for letting me meet Allison. If not for you, we never would have encountered one another at the Future House. I grew up constantly moved by her courage and leadership. And I still am. And last summer, and at the end of last year, she pulled me into two amazing experiences.”

"…"

"Thank you. I'm truly happy that I could meet you."

Major Stork, who had been silently looking into Allison's eyes throughout Wil's words of thanks, replied tersely.

"This joke has gone too far."

Of course, he was speaking Roxchean. Allison's eyes glinted.

"Wil, can I shoot him now?"

"Wait a little more, Allison." Wil replied. His hand was still holding the cylinder.

"All right." Allison nodded.

Wil looked at Major Stork again.

"I am not joking in the least. And at this moment, I am in awe of you. You truly are incredible."

Not only Major Stork, but Allison and Fiona frowned at Wil's words.

"You are amazing. Never letting the truth escape your own mouth for the sake of your position and responsibilities. What fortitude."

"Are you… all right?" Allison asked, concerned about Wil's excitement. Wil replied that he was, and returned to his praises.

"Really. Both of you. You and Allison. I am moved."

Still holding Allison's gun in his left hand, Wil took a small step toward Major Stork.

And, meeting his blue eyes, Wil quietly bowed.

"It is an honor to meet you, Major Oscar Whittington!"

"Huh?" Allison squawked.

At the same time, Wil's left hand gently snatched the gun out of her grip.

"Huh?"

Allison blankly looked down at her hands, frowned, and complained to Wil.

"Hey! What are you doing?!"

"I can't have you shooting him. Didn't you hear me? This man is your father, Major Oscar Whittington."

"What? What are you talking about, Wil? This guy is Dad's subordinate—"

"No, Allison. I lied earlier. I'm sorry. I thought that, if I said that, he might confess before you tried to shoot him. But I was wrong. It's incredible. He wouldn't talk to the very end."

"Huh?"

Allison mumbled blankly, and looked at Major Stork. His right hand was on his forehead as he sighed loudly. Then, he raised his face and muttered,

"Your reasoning?"

Naturally, he was speaking Roxchean. Wil replied, thrilled.

"I have two reasons. One big reason and one small. The small reason is the Future House. Before we shot the armored railcar, you asked me about my relationship with Allison. When I told you that we were childhood friends, you mentioned the Future House. And you said that Allison told you about it. That could only have been a lie. Allison would never talk about the Future House. Other than the one exception she made recently, she's never talked about it to anyone. Even if you were the subordinate who betrayed Major Whittington, you still wouldn't know that much. After all, there are many excellent facilities for war orphans in the Capital District, where Allison lived. You would have no reason to think of the far-away Future House."

"…"

"You could only have known because you were the one who sent Allison there. You must have made arrangements ahead of time to have her sent there after your death. Now, the second reason. Actually, ever since last summer, I had suspected that Allison's father might have been from the West."

"Because she spoke Bezelese?" Asked Major Stork. Allison looked at Wil, then at Major Stork, and busily back and forth.

"No. It's unusual, but sometimes people might learn Bezelese for use in the military. And I'd known about her fluency in Bezelese since we were children, so that's not something I'd begin to suspect recently."

Major Stork silently nodded and waited for Wil to continue.

"Do you know the fairytale 'The Princess of Greyruse'? I happened to talk about it with Allison last summer. She was already too old for fairytales by the time she came to the Future House, so that was the first time we got to talk about things like that. Allison gave me the summary of the entire story, saying that she heard it from her father. Do you know how the story ends?"

"The sky disappears."

"Yes. That's what Allison said, too. But that's not possible if her parents were from Roxche."

"Why not?"

"You must know that the story exists in Roxche as well. But I suppose you've never read the Roxchean version. The ending is completely different in the East. I didn't know about this until I read the original in the school library. The selfish princess finds the sky god, and this

is what the sky god says: 'If you wish for the sky, I shall give it to you. But in exchange you must give me your family'."

"…"

"The princess thinks for some time, but finally answers, 'I only wanted the sky because I have a family that I can look up at it with. I can't give you my family'. Then the sky god sends the princess back to the ground. The Princess of Greyruse becomes a kind person, and looks up at the blue skies with her family. The end."

"…"

Five seconds passed in silence before Major Stork shook his head and asked in Roxchean.

"Who in the world saw fit to turn that wonderfully surreal and abstract story into such an overdone lesson about family?"

Wil tilted his head and replied.

"Hm… I'm not sure myself."

"I said so, did I not? If you trust the magician, good things will happen." Said Benedict.

"Yes…" Fiona smiled, tears streaming down her face as she watched the three people.

"So, er… what does that mean?"

Allison, alone in her confusion, turned from one person to another before finally settling on Wil's smiling face.

"Wil, explain!"

"All right. I'll keep it short. Your father here, Major Whittington of Roxche, was originally from Sou Be-Il."

"Why? And didn't he die?"

"I can make a guess… but wouldn't it be better to ask the man himself?" Wil asked, urging Major Stork for an explanation.

"I'd like to hear your guess. Please, continue." Major Stork replied. Wil did as he was asked, still holding the large handgun in his right hand and the revolver in his left.

"Of course. This is what I think. You were a spy from Sou Be-Il."

They could hear Benedict gasp. Major Stork spoke quietly.

"Please, go on."

"Yes. After the Great War, tensions between East and West discreetly worsened. Both sides ended up dispatching many spies to the enemy. Everyone knows this. You, a citizen of Sou Be-Il, somehow obtained Roxchean citizenship and began to live in the East. And then you

enlisted in the military. You slowly made your way up the ranks, and your fluency in Bezelese eventually led you to work at the Main HQ in the Capital District. And, of all places, at the intelligence department. Where they gathered intel on Sou Be-Il and controlled information on Roxche."

"Please continue."

"I don't know who Allison's mother was. But in any event, when the Lestki Island conflict first began, you were tasked with an important mission. You likely had to transport, or memorize, certain information and bring it back to Sou Be-Il. There would be no other reason for you to risk your life crossing the Lutoni. You asked Grandmother Mut and arranged for Allison to enter her care, then went to Lestki Island under the pretext of an inspection. Then, in order to return to Sou Be-Il, you chose the 'best way to remove a man from existence, that no one may find him ever again'. In other words, you faked your own death. You put your identification tag on your subordinate and used a shotgun to make sure his face wouldn't be recognized, even if he was found earlier than later."

Suddenly, someone began to applaud. Major Stork was clapping.

"Incredible…" Benedict commented.

Major Stork stopped.

"It may not seem that way now, but at the time, the Roxchean military's information department was quite lax on security. Plenty of gaps for moles like me to infiltrate."

"'Moles'?" Asked Fiona.

"Moles are spies who go in secret to the intelligence department and work as the enemy's intelligence agents. They are the most effective type." Benedict explained.

"Thanks to that, the continent enjoyed peace for the next ten years. Although it also drove Mr. Terreur to madness…" Major Stork said, trailing off. Wil continued with his own conjecture.

"The information you took… was it something so critical that a second Great War would break out without it? And was Mr. Terreur connected to it?"

"Yes. What I took with me was information on the latest railroad guns that had only just been developed. From their capabilities to their positioning, to their likely placements, to blueprints of the revolutionary new shells that dramatically increased their range. If those railroad guns had been deployed, the East would have gotten the upper hand. They could have launched an all-out assault and taken the island. Sou Be-Il would have been at a staggering disadvantage. We had to prevent such a scenario, no matter what. No matter the weight of the sacrifice."

Major Stork continued.

"Most of those weapons had been manufactured at Terreur Steel. When he learned that secret information on his products were leaked, Mr. Terreur must have been apoplectic. After all, at the time, he was convinced that his company could lead Roxche to victory. Well, I suppose he wasn't wrong. But in the end, he stopped trusting the Roxchean military, which failed to protect his secrets. And he no longer cared about who bought his power. That was why he began to smuggle weapons. As I said earlier, this is connected to the Sou Be-Il

intelligence department as well. The reason I volunteered for this mission was because I wanted to finish what I had started."

"I see…" Wil breathed, nodding.

"But to think that I would run into someone I had resigned myself to never seeing again… when I spotted my grown daughter on the island—and, of all places, among the passengers I was to kill with my own two hands, I thought my heart would stop."

"Colonel… can I ask you a question?" Benedict, who had slowly come up to the aisle with Fiona, asked in Roxchean.

"Of course, Hero of the Mural."

"What is your real name?"

"Well… Stork Fren and Oscar Whittington are both real names of a sort, but currently, I go by Aikashia Cross."

"Colonel Aikashia, then. About Terreur's defecting and the group Wil talked about…"

"Ah, yes. That was just his conjecture. But does it really matter what the truth is? And really, I'm the type to lie without so much as blinking. It's not a very good idea to trust me completely. And if I were to add, 'completely correct'."

Benedict was silent at the answer. Suddenly, Fiona quietly tugged at his sleeve. She gestured with her eyes at Allison, who was still blankly standing in front of Wil.

Realizing what Fiona meant, Benedict said no more.

"Wait!" Allison cried. "So Major Stork is my dad?"

"That's what he says." Fiona said from behind. Allison turned to face her and stumbled through a denial.

"But… something's different. If I remember right… it's kind of weird to say this, but Dad was kind of… yeah! He was way more bleh! He was fat! Dad was fat and round and walked really loudly and had this stupid mustache that didn't even look good on him…"

"Please, I did my best to match my build to that of my subordinate." Major Stork said. The moment he said the word 'subordinate', sadness flashed by his face.

"I don't believe it!" Allison yelled.

Wil stepped in.

"Why don't you ask him? Something that only your father would know?"

"Right! Then here's a question for you, Major Stork. What did I call you when we were at home?"

"'Dad' in Roxchean, and 'Papa' in Bezelese. Of all the questions to ask…" Major Stork replied immediately. Allison was floored.

"He got it, Wil. Was that too easy?"

"No, that wasn't even a question. You've been referring to him as 'Dad' for a while now, and 'Papa' is the only word for 'father' in Bezelese. Try something else. Is there anything specific you remember?"

"Hmm…"

As Allison thought, Major Stork reached up and took off his glasses. Then, he placed them in the inside pocket of his uniform as he spoke.

"On your seventh birthday—"

"Huh?"

"Do you remember how you begged me to take you to Bemarte Park in the old city center? I finished work in the morning and went to pick you up at the primary school, and then the two of us walked all the way to the park together."

Allison was silent.

"You told me that you'd show me something amazing, and I helped you grab on to the highest horizontal bar in the park. Then, you flipped backwards and put your feet on the bar… I ran over, terrified, but you instantly did a backflip and leapt off the bar. That was what you'd wanted to show me."

"What did we do after that…?"

"We picked up lasagna and cake at a restaurant and had dinner at home. Your present was a new hat."

"Wait!" Allison suddenly cried. "Don't just leave out how I knocked you out for a second with a flying kick to the gut!"

Then, she took a breath.

"Is that really you, Papa…?"

She asked as though asking herself for reassurance. She was speaking Bezelese. Major Stork's answer was simple.

"You can trust Wil."

Allison turned. Wil nodded without saying a word.

Yet Allison tilted her head several times, her blond hair fluttering, narrowed her eyes, and even pinched both cheeks—Wil's cheeks.

"Ow."

“Come to think of it, Wilhelm. Were you completely confident that your conjecture was correct?” Asked Major Stork. Allison finally let go of Wil’s face. Wil shook hie head, both cheeks red.

“It was a gamble, to be honest, until I heard the truth from your lips.”

“Hah!” Major Stork laughed, amused. “If your guess was off, you could very well have been killed.”

Wil nodded, staring at Major Stork.

“Then why risk so much to do something like this?”

“I wanted to let Allison meet her father… No. Maybe I wanted to let you meet Allison. Because you would never reveal your own identity. Even in the face of death, you remained silent. You finally ran into Allison after all these years, when the war was no more, but you were still planning on leaving without a word of goodbye, weren’t you? And you would never try to see her again.”

“I gave up my right to be a father many years ago. I shouldn’t even be allowed to face her.”

“Yes. You are a terrible person. I also wanted to tell you that.”

“I see… Thank you, Wilhelm.”

“I don’t really get all the details, but…” Allison said. “This person really is my dad, right?”

Everyone nodded.

“I see…” She mumbled, looking around at everyone. Her expression was exceedingly normal, neither happy nor sad, neither thrilled nor moved.

“Say…”

Turning to Major Stork, she lightly waved the hand that had been pinching Wil’s face not too long ago.

“It’s been a while!”

There was a moment of silence. Five people stood quietly, not saying a word. Fiona finally piped up.

“Isn’t there anything you’d like to say? You haven’t seen each other in years.”

“Well… er… it’s a little awkward. Y’know, someone I just knew as ‘Major Stork’ for the past two days suddenly turns out to be my dad, and all…”

“I suppose that’s true. But it’s still wonderful. You should talk. About anything that comes to mind.”

“I guess, but…”

As Allison floundered, Major Stork spoke up.

"To think you'd become a pilot. I'm very impressed."

Allison looked up.

"You were always quite athletic, but I never dreamed that you'd be working with the latest in technology. I'm so proud of you."

"Thank you…"

"And to think that you'd enlisted in the Air Force… I always wished for peace between the nations, but if things had gone wrong, we might have ended up meeting on the battlefield. Major Carr?" Major Stork said, turning to Benedict. "Thank you. If you hadn't announced the discovery—"

"Please." Benedict said, cutting him off. "It will be a surprise, but I have to tell you something about it. I will tell you later, so now please keep talking to your daughter."

"Of course. But to be honest, I'm not sure what to talk about myself. Allison?"

"Er… yeah?"

"Will you… tell me your address later? I'd like to write to you. And send parcels. Maybe for your next birthday."

"Oh, er… Thank you. For your information, my birthday's still the same."

"Hm… well, of course. Just tell me your address."

A conversation so awkward that it did not seem like a father-daughter exchange continued.

"All right… but I don't have a proper address right now. I can get letters if you address them to my unit, but not parcels."

"I see…" Major Stork replied, quite crestfallen. The conversation stopped again.

Several seconds of silence later, Allison suddenly raised her voice.

"But! If Wil gets into Confederation U next year after he finishes secondary school, we're going to rent a place in the Capital District and live together! You can send it there!" She declared.

"Ah." She added, sounding surprised by what she had just said. Major Stork also looked rather surprised.

"Well, er… does Wilhelm agree with you?"

Allison shook her head.

"No… Actually, I haven't even asked…"

"Maybe it's a better idea to ask for his opinion ahead of time…"

“Actually, we don’t even know if he can get into Confederation U yet. That’s just what I wish would happen…”

“All right, then.”

Wil, who had been listening from behind them, suddenly spoke.

“Hm?”

“What?”

Wil addressed both the girl and her father.

“I’ve decided.”

“Decided what?” Allison asked.

“Once I finish secondary school, I’m going to get into Confederation U. And I’ll rent a place in the Capital District. Let’s live together, Allison.” Wil said firmly, still holding the large handgun in his right hand and the revolver in his left.

“Ah…”

“…”

Two sets of blue eyes widened in shock. Soon, Allison rushed to Wil with her long hair aflutter, and grabbed him by the collar.

“Ack!”

“Really?”

“Huh?”

“You mean it, right? You’re not joking or lying or pretending, right?!” Allison demanded. Wil sounded as calm as ever as he replied.

“Of course I mean it. I’ve made my choice.”

“…”

After a moment’s silence, Allison hung her head, groaned to herself, and slammed her head into Wil’s chest. Hard enough to knock the wind out of him.

Thud.

“Gah!”

And with her forehead against his chest, she stopped moving.

“It looks like we’re in the way.”

“It certainly does.”

Benedict and Fiona commented as they headed for the exit. As they passed by Wil and Allison, Wil handed the revolver to Benedict. Benedict took the gun and holstered it.

And,

“Hm? Hmm? Wait, I—”

Benedict and Fiona each took one of Major Stork’s arms as he stood blankly in the aisle.

“Let’s talk outside, shall we?”

“That sounds wonderful.”

Benedict and Fiona said, both smiling. Major Stork attempted a rebuttal as he was dragged away.

“Wait, those two are—”

“Now, now. Let’s go, Colonel.”

“But my daughter—”

“Let us leave them together.”

“She’s too young to be promising her future—”

“It is all right, so follow us, Colonel. I have a fun story about the discovery of the mural.”

“But living together at their age—”

“Now, let’s be off, Colonel. Do you dare disobey the orders of a future queen?”

“…”

Wil watched blankly as the three of them disappeared out the door.

“You made up your mind, then, right?! Great! We’re going to live together after you graduate, right?! Right?!” Allison demanded with her head raised, pulling so hard on Wil’s collar that it could tear.

Wil looked into her face, only a few centimeters away, and nodded.

“I… I was always worried.”

“Yeah?” Allison urged, her eyes about to water.

“But when I saw Major Stork go through with something so unbelievable through determination alone, I found courage. That’s how I made my choice.”

“Yeah!”

“You know, I always knew really well that it would be better to go to Confederation U. But I was too scared of failure to take that step. But now I have the courage to get over that fear.”

“Yeah! …Wait, what?”

Allison’s brows shot up.

“Allison. I’m going to attend Confederation U. And I’m going to rent a place in the Capital District. So let’s live together. Then you’ll be able to get parcels from your father.”

“Yeah… is that all?”

“No.” Wil shook his head.

“Yeah!” Allison cheered. But what followed was,

“We can halve the rent and split the housework. Living together makes things more convenient. It’s like killing two birds with one stone.”

“What? Is that really all?”

“Huh? What?”

“…Hah!”

Allison pulled on Wil’s collar as hard as she could, and put her right leg around his.

“Whoa!”

Wil was tripped with amusing ease, and he fell back-first on the floor. Allison kept her hold on his collar, sitting next to him and looking into his eyes. Her long blond hair cascaded over either side of his face. As though covered by a curtain, his line of sight was cut off. All he could see was Allison’s face, right in front of his eyes.

“That’s not what I meant when I said we should live together!”

“Ow! Please don’t do that, Allison. It hurts.” Wil yelled quietly. Each time Allison shook him, the back of his head hit the stone floor.

“You know, when you talk about a guy and a girl living together, don’t you usually think of something deeper? What in the world is going through your mind, Wil?!” Allison asked, her blue eyes glaring straight at Wil. Wil struggled to answer.

“Er, what do you—gah!”

“I mean, what do you think of me?!”

“Hm? Of course I like you, Allison. You always gave me courage—ow!”

“That’s not what I’m talking about!” Allison cried. Then,

“Say, Wil? Can I kiss you?”

"Huh? …Here?" Wil asked, his eyes widening in shock.

"What do you think?! Didn't you hear what they said earlier? It *has* to be here!" Allison cried, shaking him mercilessly.

"Ouch. All right, all right. Okay—"

Before the altar in the deserted chapel, Allison's face slowly approached Wil's as he lay on the floor. And she stopped.

Their faces were hidden beneath a veil of gold.

Before the Prologue - b

Another uneventful day of classes came to an end. In a few days, it would be summer break.

"Bye, Lillia."

"Bye. See you later."

I left my friend—who was busy with club activities—took my bag, and headed for the gates.

To get home, I have to take a bus from here, transfer to the subway, and then walk a little more.

I chose to attend this secondary school—and I like it very much. But it's true that it's a bit of a chore to commute here every day. It'd be nice if someone could come pick me up, but I'm going to have to refuse Mom showing up in a slick, flashy sports car like last time, or her friends from work driving here on their way to see her sometimes on a green four-wheel drive vehicle topped with a machine gun.

"Oh well."

That's how things always are.

I decided to kill time by reading on the bus, and stepped out the school gates. About a dozen or so female students were crowded in the school parking lot outside.

One of them asked someone, "Where are you from?".

Someone was surrounded by the sixth-year girls. I couldn't tell who. But I guess it doesn't really matter. At least, that's what I thought as I passed by—

"Ah! There you are."

I heard a familiar voice from the crowd. It was a male voice.

Over twenty eyes glared daggers at me from the five o'clock direction.

"Lillia!"

Don't call me by name!

"Miss Lillianne Aikashia Corazòn Whittington Schultz!"

Don't call me by my full name!

I turned with a furious glare. The sixth-years flinched like they spotted a wild animal from the zoo on the loose, and moved aside so I could see the owner of the voice. Tch. Talk about being uselessly considerate.

"It's been a while, Lillia. How're you doing?"

Surrounded by the girls was a motorcycle equipped with a sidecar. It was a pretty new model, and the sidecar was spacious. The owner was sitting on the motorcycle. Put simply, he's a boy one year older than I am. Done.

I gave him a look. He suddenly spoke up.

"Huh? Don't tell me you forgot about me. We used to play together all the time—heck, we used to sleep together, too."

The sixth-years shrieked in unison. It occurred to me that I should give this guy a good punch or three. I went up to him, ready to do just that, when a senior-classman— who was both ridiculously beautiful and ridiculously rich—spoke up.

"Is this your childhood friend?"

"Yes. Looks like this is goodbye for you and me, ladies. What a shame."

"Flattery will get you nowhere."

"Hmph."

The senior-classman scrutinized me like a product on display. Then, she called her friends away as she headed for the luxury car that waited for her. If you stare, the least you could do is apologize. Talk about rude.

I went up to the guy who was waving like a smiling idiot and scolded him.

"What are you *doing* here?! Why?!"

He *is* my childhood friend. I remember playing with him a lot when I was little. But that's only because he lives next door to the most famous inn in the Kingdom of Iks—the country in the Central Mountain Range on the western tip of Roxche that I visit with Mom every holiday season—and because there aren't many other kids our age in that valley.

Incidentally, Iks has been the most popular tourist destination as voted by Roxche for the past ten years. Under the rule of the wise and beautiful Queen Francesca, Iks has been drawing in tourists while maintaining its trademark culture and history. It's also on very good terms with the royal families of Sou Be-Il. I don't know her name, but there's also a princess. The next ruler is also going to be a queen.

Anyway, this guy's name is Treize.

I don't know his family name. After he gave me this embarrassing gem—"*Call me Treize of Ikstova*"—it sounded kind of stupid to use a title for him. So I just call him Treize. We met once or twice a year in over the past few years. I've never met him in the Capital District.

I couldn't even pay lip service to his messy pants and patched-up jacket. He wore a long pair of boots—which I couldn't tell if they were for horseback riding or motorcycling—and he had a belt pack around his waist.

I don't really dislike this guy or hate him. But he does get on my nerves.

Treize finally answered me.

“Your mom—Allison—sent me.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. When I got to the Capital District, I called the Air Force number she gave me before. She told me, ‘It’s about time for classes to end, so seduce or kidnap my daughter home’.”

I could not find the words to answer.

“She also said, ‘Lillia’s school’s pretty far from home, so I’m sure she’ll appreciate it’.”

“Really?”

Treize pointed at the sidecar and told me to get in. It was covered in dirt. It wasn’t exactly the kind of thing you wanted to escort someone in. There was luggage and travel gear piled on the back of the seat and the sidecar. Bags, a sleeping bag, a tent, pots, and stuff like that.

“Don’t tell me… did you come all the way here from Iks on your motorcycle?”

“Of course.” Treize answered simply.

I was at a loss. Does this guy even know how many thousands of kilometers it is from Iks to here?

“I didn’t have enough money to stay at hotels, so I camped out on the plains on the way. I came as fast as I could, but it still took twenty days.”

“Are you an idiot? It only takes three days by train or aeroplane.”

Aeroplanes are the hottest mode of transport for vacationing these days.

“Stuff I don’t fly or drive myself just isn’t that fun. You know what I mean, right?”

“Ugh…”

I didn’t answer. I understood what he meant.

The reason Treize bugs me is because he shares the two talents I have that other secondary school students don’t. My two specialties.

One is flying.

When I was little, Mom used to leave me at the daycare on the Air Force base. When flights were grounded due to bad weather, Mom would bring me to the hangar and show me the aeroplanes. When I got a little bigger—big enough to sit in an aeroplane seat—she wold often take me out for a ride. Mom drove me to a primary school near the base. After class, I would often go to the base to play, and Mom would take me on an aeroplane ride whenever she had the time. And when I was around ten years old,

“Why don’t you give it a shot, Lillia? No one’s watching, anyway.”

“Okay!”

It was unbelievable, but that's when I started learning to pilot an aeroplane.

Just like a normal mom teaches her daughter how to bake cookies, Mom completely ignored official Air Force pilot training programs and taught me to fly.

Once I started getting the hang of flying to my heart's content, she taught me takeoff and landing procedures, aerobatic maneuvers, how to read the instrument panel, how to read the weather, and about different types of aeroplanes. Maybe she's just that good of a teacher, or maybe I had talent, just like she said. Right now, I'm better at flying than I am at riding a bicycle.

Treize also knows how to fly an aeroplane.

Thanks to Queen Francesca's love of planes, there are apparently a lot of crafts used for tourism in Iks. Maybe that's why Treize knows. When I expressed my disbelief, the next day, he brought a small aeroplane from somewhere and flew it right in front of my eyes. To be honest, he was a better pilot than me. He was doing aerobatic maneuvers to the background of the incredible Central Mountain Range.

The other talent we share is our fluency in Bezelese.

I can speak Bezelese, the official language of Sou Be-Il. That's also thanks to Mom. We spoke both languages at home ever since I was little, and until I started going to daycare, I thought that was what all families did.

Unlike before, there's a lot of activity between Roxche and Sou Be-Il, both on the cultural and economic levels. Students in good academic standing are chosen as exchange students and are given full scholarships by the government to study Cross-River. People can go by train, ship, or aeroplane, but not many people can speak both languages yet.

My school offers Bezelese classes, but when I asked the Bezelese teacher if I should take the class, I received the credit on the spot and was told that I had nothing more to learn in secondary school. According to the teacher, I should take it in university for writing a thesis or something.

Treize also speaks Bezelese. That's another mystery, but it's probably because Iks gets a lot of visitors from the West.

"So are you gonna stay at our place?"

"Allison gave me permission. Although I'm not sure if a certain childhood friend will. Hey, did you just snort?"

Man, he's got good ears.

"Never mind. Fine. So you're taking me home, right?"

"Of course, Milady. Please, have a seat. The helmet's in there, right?"

I picked up the leather hat that was rolling in front of the sidecar seat. It looked like an aviator hat. I put it on and pulled the tinted goggles over my face so no one would recognize me.

The streets in the Capital District are sometimes incredibly congested, and sometimes completely empty.

Treize followed my directions. He was pretty good at riding a motorcycle. Much better than the subway, which brakes out of nowhere every five minutes.

At this speed, we probably have time for a detour. I told Treize to take another route because I wanted to drop by somewhere.

We arrived at a park in the middle of the Capital District. It's a refreshing place where the entire area is covered in grass and woodland.

"'Bemarte Park', huh? Funny name." Treize remarked, parking the motorcycle by the road. I walked onto the grass. I laid down and looked up at the blue sky.

"Ah… that feels good."

"Aren't secondary school students supposed to go home straight after class?"

"What are you, my teacher?"

"No, but…"

"Then cut your worrying. And move away a little. Someone might think we're friends or something."

"Sure, sure."

"One 'sure' is enough."

"Sure, Milady."

"What's with the Old Roxchean?"

I lay on the grass for a while, looking up at the cool green trees and the sky filling my view. I almost never visit this park, but ever since Mom brought me here for my birthday, Bemarte Park's been one of my favorite places.

With my right hand I drew an aeroplane.

"Whoosh."

It climbed, then twisted at the apex and dropped straight down. I repeated the motions for fun. Now that I think about it, I haven't gone flying recently because of school. I should ask Mom once summer break starts.

Wait, summer break? Something's not right here. I spoke with my eyes still on the sky.

"Treize."

"Yeah?"

"You just took a twenty-day trip. What about school?"

“I don’t go to school. Didn’t I tell you?”

I turned and looked at Treize. He was sitting with his legs stretched, looking back at me.

“Then do you work? Don’t tell me you pilot tour planes?”

“Huh? No…”

He trailed off. I asked him what he did every day. This is what he said.

“It’s a secret.”

What the heck? Surprisingly, he looked pretty serious. I asked,

“Doesn’t your family say anything about it?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“What? But you know everything about *my* family. Tell me.” I said, sounding a little more pushy.

Treize stared at the sky for a while. Was he just going to ignore me? But at that moment, he clenched his right hand into a fist, put it over his chest, and said in a completely serious tone,

“That’s a secret. The moment I tell will be when I propose to you, Lillia.”

What. The. Heck?!

Who does he think he is, some sort of mysterious prince? I leapt off the grass and kicked him in the back.

“Driver, we’re going!”

“Sure, sure.”

“One ‘sure’ is enough!”

“Sure, sure…”

Once I returned home on my servant’s motorcycle, I found Mom’s sports car in her usual parking space. After a car company moved in by the narrow road next to the apartment complex, people wouldn’t stop parking illegally there. So they had no choice but to dedicate one lane to parking and make the other lane a one-way street. People rub bumpers as they squeeze into any space they find.

We parked the motorcycle and took the elevator up to the top floor. Of course, I didn’t carry a single piece of luggage for Treize.

“I’m home.”

I left Treize at the door as he struggled with his things, and ran into—

“Welcome back. It’s been a long time.”

“…”

Not Mom, but Mr. Hero. He’d walked out of Mom’s room.

He was a man in a brown uniform. He had black hair and wore glasses. Mr. Hero put a finger to his lips and slowly shut the door, leaving it slightly ajar.

“Hello…” I said. Mr. Hero spoke in a quiet voice.

“Hello, Miss Lillianne. Do you remember my name?”

I replied half-mechanically.

“Yes, Major Travas.”

He was Major Travas of the Sou Be-Il Royal Army. He could speak Roxchean as well, but right now he was speaking Bezelese.

“You were on a date with Mom today, right? Thank you for taking the trouble to bring her all the way home.”

“Not a problem. Your mother was complaining about being tired, and she just fell asleep.”

“I see. Thank you.”

“Actually, I’ve been invited to join you for dinner. May I wait here?”

“Be my guest.” I replied, and said no more.

Major Travas thanked me and headed for the living room further down the hall. He’s come here a few times, so he naturally knows the layout.

I stood in front of Mom’s door and peered inside. The setting sun was casting an orange light into the room, and she was lying on the big bed in her comfy military-issue sweats.

“…”

She looked happy as she slept. How many times have I seen that expression on her face?

I closed the door completely.

And just as I turned toward the living room, I remembered someone. I turned and switched gears to Roxchean. It didn’t really matter what language I spoke, but still.

“You come in too. The spare room’s open, so just put your stuff there or whatever.”

“All right. Who was that?”

“Mom’s boyfriend. From Cross-River.”

“Does he come often?”

“Not much these days. Well, doesn’t really matter.”

“Is this really all right?”

“I said it is. It’s fine.”

“Really…?”

Treize looked a little upset. He began to put down his armful of stuff in the spare room. I walked in the opposite direction from where Major Travas disappeared to. And,

“Here. Let me help.”

“Thanks.”

Treize looked strangely sincere. Almost like a kid. I’d almost never seen him make that face.

“What? Puppy-dog eyes won’t get you anywhere with me.” I said, trying to hide my surprise.

“You could at least get me a cup of tea or something.”

That was pretty rude.

Oh well.

I guess I can brew a cup of tea for the two of them.

“I’m gonna go change, so watch TV or something. Also, don’t even think about peeping.” Lillia said as she went into her room. The boy and the man sat at the table with two steaming cups of tea between them.

Lillia opened the glass door and disappeared into the room along the hall.

“…”

When Treize turned, his eyes met those of the major. He was looking at him.

“Huh…?” Treize gasped.

“What might be the matter?” Major Travas asked in Roxchean. Treize shook his head, answering that it was nothing. Then, he picked up his cup and happily sipped his tea.

“Hmm…”

Suddenly, he realized that Major Travas had not even touched his cup.

“You think Lillia poisoned it or something?” Treize asked, a little annoyed. Major Travas shook his head.

“No, it’s just that I’m not very good with hot foods and drinks. It’s a habit I could never fix.”

“I see.” Treize replied, and returned to his tea. He was about halfway through when,

“It’s been a long time. It’s an honor to be able to meet you again.” Said Major Travas.

Treize put down his cup and gave the man a quizzical look.

“Have we met before?”

“Yes. Although it’s been nearly ten years now. You’ve grown quite a bit, Your Highness.”

Treize silently glared at the man.

Major Travas slowly bowed. Treize glanced at the hall. Thankfully, Lillia was still in her room.

“…Please, raise your head. Who are you?”

Major Travas did as he was asked.

“The one you suspect me to be.”

“I see… so it’s you. The one Father and Mother always spoke of.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“The true Hero of the Mural, the Magician who saved Mother, Allison’s trustworthy subordinate, and—”

“Did they tell you that much?”

“—Lillia’s father, Wilhelm Schultz. I knew I saw a resemblance. She has your eyes.”

“Ah, so that was why—”

“Yes.”

“I am happy to hear that.”

Wil picked up his cup, blew on it, and finally began to drink.

“This tea is delicious. It’s the first time Lillia’s ever brewed tea for me.”

Treize silently emptied his cup. When he placed it on the table, Major Travas said quietly,

“I came here today because I was told you came to the Capital District. I’d wanted to let you know about me.”

“I see. …I will protect your secret with my life.”

“Thank you. But your life comes before my secret. You must protect yourself, and—”

“And?”

“The one you love.”

“I will.”

Treize and Major Travas continued to quietly chat over tea, making sure to occasionally glance down the hallway.

Major Travas asked about Treize's family. Treize explained.

That his mother Queen Francesca, and his father Benedict—who had left the Sou Be-Il military to help his wife—were both doing very well and were in good health. That they were so relaxed that they could often go back and forth between the royal palace in Kunst and the valley. That the only hard worker in the family—his sister the princess—was left to grumble about how it was all up to her to get things done.

"Meriel thinks she's the older sister, but I think she's the younger one. We argue about it every time we meet. Being twins sure is a bother. But Mother was right to choose Meriel. I like being able to come here like this."

"I see." Major Travas replied, an amused smile on his face.

Treize asked how Wil was able to gain Sou Be-Il citizenship.

Although he added that Major Travas did not have to answer, Travas told him. That, upon graduating from Confederation Capital University after three years of study, he became the adopted son of a trustworthy Sou Be-Il aristocrat. That he attended university in Sou Be-Il for about two years under the tutelage of a distinguished individual. That, as planned, he took on the job of clearing up international problems at the embassy.

"It was quite painful to kill 'Wilhelm Schultz', but I did not wish to get an innocent person involved." Major Travas confessed, his eyes narrowed.

"You mean Lillia?" Treize asked for confirmation.

Major Travas nodded. He then explained that he had fewer dangerous missions now, and that thanks to that, he was able to spend more time with Allison as her 'boyfriend'.

"One day… will you be able to tell Lillia the truth?"

"I'm not sure. Would it be best to tell her, or keep her in the dark? What do you think?"

"I'm not sure…" Treize answered, mirroring Major Travas's answer.

At that moment, Lillia finished changing and came out of her room. Major Travas also noticed that she had come outside.

They ended the conversation they had as their true selves.

"Please take care of Lillia."

"Of course."

Placing a hand over his chest, Treize quietly but firmly nodded. Then he added,

"Although I have no idea what *she* wants of me…"

-**End**-

9784840226813

ISBN4-8402-2681-4

C0193 ¥510E

1920193005103

発行●メディアワークス

定価:本体510円
※消費税が別に加算されます